

THE SIREN'S LURE

Frances Zavvacky

The then and the there, the Here and the now, all Eternity

Gathers itself
Unto me. Through me
All ages are accessible upon
Request; all places are open to your
Demands. Come, step through my portal.
Imagine the good that you might accomplish
And the adventures that await on your walks through time.
Now the past, present and future lie before. Come and walk.

Dedication

to John Young, Bob Crippen & NASA

for their step toward the STARS



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May, 1981

CONTENTS:

Cover: Nan Lewis Bacover: Joni Wagner

PAI	
"The Siren's Lure"Frances Zawacky	. 1
Dedication	. 2
Cynthia's Editorial	.4
Linda's Editorial	.5
"Han Two, Jabba Zero"Pat Nolan	.6
"Yoda's Theme"Fern Marder	12
"The Way Back Home"Denise Tathwell	13
"Winged Dreams"Jeanne Cloud	16
"The Clone-Master"Eileen Roy	17
"Grief"Gene S. Delapenia	19
"The Man on the Bridge"Ellen L. Kobrin	20
"True to the Blood"Carol Mularski	21
"Rebels' Lament"Jani Hicks	16
"Evilla May Strikes Back Again"Sandy Hall	17
"The Hard Life & Good Times of Han Solo"Jani Hicks	+/
"The Hard Live & Good Times of Han Solo"Jani Hicks	28
"The Winds of Decision"Jacqueline Bielowicz	
"To Spock"Jennifer Weston	
"Speculation Department"Ann Popplestone	80
"Sandy"Sheryl Adsit	59
"Haiku Sequence: Merlin & His Familiar"Diana Rusnak	74
Three poemsDayle S. Barker	75
"Hyperspace an' Freedom"Jani Hicks	76
"Burger Trek"Ingrid Cross	77
"Friend"Susan Fine & Carole Berger	33
Two poemsCharla Menke	84
"The Gold Against the Fire"Cathi Brown	85
"Creatures of the Dark Side"Amy Falkowitz	97
"The Extraordinary Discretion Affair"Susan R. Matthews1	09
"The Ragged Star Seed Rag"Judy Ferguson-Clark1	15
"What Honor Demands"Charla Menke1	
"Thoughts on a Paradise Lost"Merlin Thomas	
"Dreambreaker"Joy Mancinelli	34
"Tit for Tat"Roberta Rogow1	39
"Retreat from Danger"Abbie Herrick	46
"The Deadly Years"Tina W. Pole	58
"Tribble Trek: The Motion Picture"Tina W. Pole1	60
"Paradox"June Edwards	72
"Slow Boat to Bespin 1"Anne Elizabeth Zeek	71
"Slow Boat to Bespin I"Anne Elizabeth Zeek	02
"Slow Boat to Bespin 2"Barbara Wenk	00
"My Love Has Wings"Annette Hall1	09
"No Guarantees"Maggie Nowakowska1	93

ARTISTS:

Kathy Carlson: 14
Julie Cesari: 60, 64
June Edwards: 173
Amy Falkowitz: 99-108
Steve Gallacci: 70, 72
Barbara Gordon: 90, 92
Abbie Herrick: 82, 147, 148, 150, 152, 156, 157
Robin Hill: 160, 164, 170
Vel Jaeger: 18
Pam Kowalski: 196, 201, 204, 208, 213
Martynn: 45, 58, 176, 185, 188
Christine Myers: 137
Pat O'Neill: 24, 33, 39, 41, 81
P.S. Nim: 16
Leah Rosenthal: 12, 142, 145
Stu Shiffman: 4
Marty Siegrist: 113, 191
Mary Stacy-MacDonald: 9, 119, 130
Jennifer Weston: 67
Bev Zuk: 159

Gordon Carleton: 54

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EDITORIAL

Linda has been pushing me to write this editorial for over three months and, true to form, I have been procrastinating. But I have been forced (no pun intended - in either of the inferred universes) by time to finally sit down and do it.

You have been forewarned.

As always, I must thank all our contributors and readers, plus those travelers who were recruited (some against their will) to proof this monster. You've come through like troopers - again.

This past year (18 months?!) has been a revelation - not only to me, but to my pocketbook (principal recipients being Ma Bell and the Post Awful). Whoever said edit and publish a fanzine (or, for that matter, do anything) long distance ought to be shot! Although the reassignment of responsibilities has made it a bit simpler, overall I would have to say that to describe the production of this issue would require paraphrasing an old Israeli saying: the difficult is easy; the impossible just takes a little longer.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not quitting. All I'm going to do when this finally gets to the printer is have my head examined.

GUARDIAN WILL CONTINUE however. And I would like to restate some information that has appeared elsewhere, but bears repeating:

All contributions should be sent to Linda; all orders should be sent to me.

In closing, I have to say that Fandom is very much alive and doing well in Minnesota.





EDITORIAL

Ghads, has it really been more than 18 months since issue two? Where has the time gone? (Not that it hasn't been an interesting time.) All I know is that I was at Seacon in England while Two was at the printer, and this time round I'll have been in Jamaica, West Indies.

I'd like to reiterate Cynthia's thank-you to our contributors, pruf-readers, and everyone else who got involved with this montroled with this montroled with this montroled along the way. (And I'd also like to thank my mother for understanding why I didn't have time to talk to her on the phone the two weeks before we went to the printer!)

I should apologise for the zine being so late. It's not easy putting out a fanzine and running a major science fiction convention at the same time (and I don't know how Lori Carleton manages; Ghu bless her!).

Another reason for the delay is that I seem to have miscalculated again, and this issue is now even larger than our previous. Another delay was caused by (you guessed it) the post awful, which decided to keep 40 typed pages for over three weeks in order to cause me to have a nervous breakdown. And I won't mention my frantic phone calls to Gordon Carleton, worried that his art was lost, because I didn't know the post awful had put it with a package from England and given a pick-up notice to my superintendent -- who waited over a week to let me know the post awful had something for me! And you thought putting out a zine was easy!

Now we're down to the last couple of hours before this zine has to go to the printer if I'm to get on a plane and this zine is going to get out for Media*West. (I'd've had ten more days if my girlfriend hadn't chosen this week to hold her wedding in Jamaica.)

Which leads me the long way round to an apology for no zine listing in this issue. There just isn't time to put it together. Instead, I will herewith list the three buying guide zines that do a wonderful job of keeping fandom informed about current and upcoming zines.

- 1) Jundland Wastes. Star Wars oriented. \$.90 for one issue; \$2.70 for three-issue sub, first class. Write to: Pat Nussman; 113 Washington Street; Williamsburg, VA 23185.
- 2) Universal Translator. Probably the most extensive. \$1.50 per issue; SASE for subs. Order from: Rose M. Jakubjansky; 39-84 48th Street; Long Island City, NY 11104.
- 3) Forum. Star Trek oriented. \$1.00 for one issue; \$3.60 for four; \$6.75 for nine. Write to: KathE Donnelly, 6302 Spotswood Street; Littleton,

CO 80120.

Now on to other things. I want to thank Martynn and Jan Sidwell for allowing us to reprint Martynn's Luke and C-3PO illustration, albeit in somewhat different form from its appearance in Mos Eisley Tribune 3. This time, Martynn has captioned it. And at the same time, I want to apologise to Martynn for having to drastically reduce her beautiful illo for Jani Hicks' "Hard Life and Good Times of Han Solo".

I also want to thank Tina Pole for allowing us to reprint "Tribble Trek", which was a zine in its own right in Great Britain. Tina was one of those \emptyset kind souls who was gracious enough to put me up for a few days during my visit across the Big Pond.

This issue is about 50-50 Star Trek and Star Wars, with a little Man from UNCLE thrown in for good measure (yes, I know that adds up to more than 100%, but who cares). Star Wars in particular tends to generate universes, and this issue features Maggie Nowakowska's Thousand Worlds, Carol Mularski's Desert Seed, Abbie Herrick's Nightside universes, as well as a Circle of Fire story by Anne Elizabeth Zeek. Star Trek, too, engenders series, and Jean Stevenson has contributed one of her tales of Dharien'g't.

Amy Falkowitz and I were talking at Noreascon Two this past summer, and she told me about the "Critters of the Force" that she was doing for Twin Suns II. I told her we'd like her to do something for Guardian, and she came up with "Creatures of the Dark Side". I love it.

I also want to thank the people who came up with artwork on very short notice -- and then let me delay the zine by about four months without cutting my head off! Leah Rosenthal, Vel Jaeger, Steve Gallacci, and Pat O'Neill (the last two didn't even remember doing anything!). Conversely, I want to apologise to Joni Wagner for holding her artwork for well over a year because she got it to us so early!

Even though I've gone on and on, I'm sure I've forgotten to thank or apologise to someone (that's the way this zine has gone, I'm afraid), but I've just put in two straight 14-hour days getting ready for the printer, and my mind is just about gone.

Just one other thing: even though we don't print correspondence, feedback is very important to us. Please write and let us know what you think of our efforts. Now, sit back, start reading, and enjoy!

Linda

P.S. Thanks, Regina!

HAN TWO; JABBA ZERO

Pat Nolan

Luke glanced around the bazaar on Ord Mantell, wondering what was keeping Han and Chewbacca. It was unlike the Corellian to miss a rendezvous, especially when their mission was so important. The pay offered Han by the Alliance was attractive, but by now Luke realized it was not merely money that kept the smuggler with them. No. It was something more, something Luke figured the other would never admit.

This was Luke's first trip away from the new rebel base on Eran. Since joining the Alliance he had been too involved in training to be a fighter pilot, with little time to think of anything else let alone to leave the base. Therefore, when Han asked him to come along on this courier mission, he had jumped at the chance to relieve his restlessness. In his dreams he had never imagined the boring routine involved in fighting a war. Books he had read while growing up on Tatooine had stressed the excitement and glories of war. Reality, he had discovered, did not always live up to one's expectations. Now, released from duty, Luke felt almost like a kid on holiday. Somehow he felt he was not going to be bored for awhile.

Where were Han and Chewbacca? They should have arranged a meeting with their contact by now. Something may have happened to them. But what could he do? Han had said only that they would be talking to an acquaintance.

For the first time since leaving Eran, he tried tuning in to the Force, hoping in this way he might sense where his friends were and if they were safe. This was different, however, from practicing

the exercises Ben Kenobi had taught him and he gave up in frustration. The Force might bind the universe together, but it was certainly proving to be a poor homing device. For the umpteenth time he wished he had known Obi-wan longer.

"Yah wanna buy somma me nice glo-crystals?"

"What?" Luke jumped, startled by the highpitched wheedling voice.

"Me glo-crystals. Imported all the way from Ze'atrol." The voice belonged to a small, yellow-brown alien.

"Don't believe him, kid," a familiar voice interrupted. Picking up a gem, Han closed one eye and scrutinized it. "This hunk of glass ain't worth a milli-credit."

"Yah ain't got no call ruining me sale. The young gen'lman were in'erested in me Ze'atrol glocrystals."

"They're fakes, dealer. Luke, we still have work to do, if you're ready."

Luke nodded and started to turn away.

The merchant stormed from his booth and glowered at Han.

"Them gems is genuine, *Kreepasht*." Han's jaw clenched and Luke could see the Corellian fighting to control his temper. He wondered why the merchant had used such an obscenity. "D'yer think ya

can call me a liar and then run away from a fight?"

"Aaargh grrrr."

"You're right, Chewie. He said it himself."

The huge Wookiee crossed his arms over his barrel chest and grinned down at the sullen merchant who skulked back into his booth, grumbling imprecations. As the trio pushed their way through the crowd, Luke shook with silent laughter at the expression on the little alien's face. Han and Chewbacca certainly knew how to use the Wookiee's intimidating presence.

"Rrrah wrrr grra," Chewbacca growled softly.

"Yeah, I know. But he's just a con-man. He can't do anything to me." $\,$

"What do you mean, Han?"

"It's nothing, kid."

Luke shrugged, knowing better than to question Han when the Corellian obviously did not intend to divulge any secrets.

"Did you find our contact?" Luke asked as they stopped before another booth. $\,$

"Yeah, he'll be at the Lace Goiley at midday."

"The Lace Goiley?"

"Yeah, it's a sort of cabaret/cathouse, very popular with spacers."

"We might as well hang around here for a while yet, unless you have any objections."

"None," Luke said as nonchalantly as possible, pleased with the chance to see more of the things he had only read about in books. Once more he was glad he had agreed to come along on this trip.

Sunlight glinting off a veritable rainbow caught Luke's eye and he put out a hand to stop Han.

"I've seen pictures of them, but never actually seen one." Luke touched the top tapestry, surprised at the silkiness. "Aunt Beru..." the name caught in his throat. Even after a year it still hurt to recall his last day on Tatooine. "My aunt would have liked one of these. She always loved brightly colored things. I wish...." Tears, unshed when his aunt and uncle were killed, filled his eyes and he turned away from his companions. Across the crowded concourse he saw the glo-crystal merchant's booth. The wizened little alien was talking to a tall blue-green reptilian, gesturing and bobbing his head as he spoke. The Kdruajb native appeared to be driving a hard bargain. Luke suddenly shivered. He had a premonition that some-

thing was wrong but he could not pin down the source, even when he tried reaching out with the Force.

"Come on, kid, we haven't got all day."

He turned around to face an unexpected look of sympathy. "I'm coming."

As the crystal merchant's booth passed out of Luke's sight, he wondered if the little alien had found someone gullible enough to purchase one of the faceted pieces of glass.

Rare kyra leather boots, bags and belts over-flowed the counter of another booth, next to one of cast metal sculptures. The air here was filled with the fresh, clean scent of new leather. But it was a jeweler's display a little further down the line of booths which caught Luke's eye. Never in his life had he imagined so many different jeweled ornaments. And the prices! It would take a year's income from the Lars moisture farm to purchase even a ring with the smallest stone. Not daring to touch anything, Luke stared awestruck at the myriad items displayed before his eyes.

"Looking for something special, young man? Maybe something for your sweetheart?" a felinoid inquired from behind the counter.

"Uh...no. Just looking."

"I've the best selection on Ord Mantell."

"Uh...I can see that...but I'm not buying today."

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"Seen enough, kid?" Han asked sometime later.

"Yeah."

Han smiled and Luke felt the Corellian understood his need to see and do all the things that had only been dreams to a Tatooine farmboy.

"Aaaaarrah grrrr arrrr."

"Agreed, Chewie. I know the perfect place to eat."

"Aaaarah rrah grr wrr."

"It's not $\underline{\text{that}}$ bad. The food's edible and cheap."

Chewbacca shrugged, giving Luke a martyred look that spoke of previous meals eaten there; it did not appear encouraging.

"I don't think Chewie agrees with you."

"He doesn't, but we ain't gonna find a better place around here." $\,$

Crossing a passage between two rows of booths and turning a corner with his companions, Luke found himself in front of a narrow, dingy restaurant. An overpowering aroma of stale grease turned his stomach but he followed Han into the place.

Solo chose a small booth by the front window and settled himself on a thickly padded, vinyl-covered bench. Chewbacca slid in next to the Corellian and Luke sat down facing the two smugglers.

After ordering, Luke pulled a w'jet from a pouch on his utility belt and started fiddling with it, but it still would not produce any music.

"Whatcha got there, kid?"

"An authentic Sigmathian w'jet."

"Where'd you get it?"

"I bought it from one of the booths while I was waiting for you and Chewie. I've never seen one and..." The contraption did not seem to be behaving like the sample the seller had shown him. "Damn."

"Let me see that."

Luke handed it over to his friend.

"What a piece of junk!" The Corellian grinned, and Luke winced at the memory of calling the Falcon that. "How much did you pay for this, kid?"

"Twelve credits; he wanted fifteen but I bargained him down," Luke replied, proud of his bartering ability.

"This thing ain't worth more than a credit, for the metal it contains."

"I'll take it back," Luke said, deflated.

"Won't work, kid. You've been rooked but good." Leaning back in his chair, Han spread his hands. "Hey, don't look so glum. Everyone has to learn sometime; you just ain't never been around before. Next time you'll be more careful before you spend your money."

"That's for sure," Luke answered sadly.

"Listen, at least you only lost twelve credits. The first time I was here I bought a 'genuine Ze'-atrol glo-crystal' from a certain merchant. Cost me twenty-five credits, half my pay as an apprentice on Lore Ka'roll's freighter."

Chewbacca laughed and Luke, still finding it hard to believe that Han was ever that gullible, joined in.

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An hour later, at noon, suffering from acute indigestion, Luke entered the Lace Goiley with Han and Chewbacca. The trio paused in the entryway while Solo searched the smoke-filled room. For what? Luke wondered. The raucous sound of a third-rate jazz band formed a backdrop to the loud talk and laughter among the tables. A long counter, manned by a bear-like native of Origa, occupied one side of the large room. Scantily clad females, males, and whatevers of varying species moved through the crowd serving beverages. Luke wrinkled his nose at the overpowering smell of alcohol and the sickly odor of smoking drugs.

A not-too-young woman in a slinky, lowcut red dress with a slit that hid little of her thigh, glided up to Luke. Short frizzy blue-black curls crowned an oval face. Eyes glinting like black diamonds, she scrutinized Luke and his companions.

"Why don't you buy me a drink, good-looking?" she asked huskily.

"Ah --"

"Not now, ma'am. Maybe later," Han interrupted before Luke could reply. With a quick glance at Solo, the woman moved off, approaching another newly arrived patron.

Although the proposition had been unexpected, Luke felt annoyed at Han's big brother attitude.

"I could have handled her," Luke said indignantly.

"She ain't selling w'jets, kid."

"I know!"

"Aaarah grrrag." Chewbacca's voice reminded Luke of why they were there. Even though he still could not understand Wooka, Han's answer made the comment clear.

"Yeah, I see him."

Luke followed the Corellian along a serpentine course to a half-concealed table in a corner of the room.

"Greetings, Captain Solo...Commander Skywalker. It's been a long time, Chewbacca. I thought you'd given up on this old recalcitrant and the *Millennium Falcon*." In the amber eyes of the ebony-skinned felinoid native of Saronya there was a twinkle that spoke of long acquaintance with the two smugglers.

"Arrrrrraarh."

"Do you have the disk, Vragril?" Han asked, sitting down without waiting for an invitation. The others did likewise.

"Yes, as well as the supplies you requested."

"Good." Han removed a small credit purse from his belt as Vragril gave Luke the holo-disk. "Check it, kid."

"Still don't trust me, eh, Solo?" Vragril said with a hint of annoyance.

"Han, you know him!"

"So what? You got took once today, kid. I got took once a long time ago. Once! Check it!"

Luke activated the disk furtively; it contained the information on the latest Imperial troop deployments as well as a summary of Darth Vader's attempts to find the Alliance's new base. "It's the real thing."

"Here, Vragril." Han handed over the money.



"See, kid. If Vragril wasn't dealing with me, he might try to get smart. Nobody ever asks you to be smart. They depend on you being stupid."

Luke nodded, sighing to himself. There was still so much he had to learn.

Business completed amicably, Han and Vragril settled down to socialize. Curious about his surroundings and uninterested in a conversation which dealt with people and events Luke had no knowledge of, he studied the dimly lit room. A vaguely familiar reptilian form entered the cabaret by the main door and sat down at a nearby table. The alien took out a black box and spoke into it. Luke tapped Han on the arm.

"What is it, kid?"

"I think we should leave," Luke replied in a voice pitched so only his companion could hear.

"Why?"

"Do you see that Kdruajb over there?" Luke asked. Han nodded. "I saw him talking to the glocrystal merchant this morning, and I caught a glimpse of him outside the place where we ate. I don't think it's coincidental."

"Wrrrrarrah groworgh."

"Uh, yeah, I think you're right, Chewie. The kid's got a point. We can't afford trouble this trip."

"Glo-crystal merchant?! Did you have another run in with Haveril Slina?" Vragril asked.

"Yeah, he tried to foist some of that glass off on Luke." $\,$

"You'll never learn, will you, Solo?"

"Couldn't let him rook my friend, could I?" Han retorted indignantly.

"You'll interfere with Haveril's business just once too often, Solo, and you'll find a knife between your ribs some dark night."

"Let him try it."

Vragril shrugged his shoulders.

Luke stared at Han. "You know that guy?"

"It's a long story, kid. Remind me to tell you about it sometime." $\,$

"The supplies have all been loaded and you're cleared for immediate take-off, Captain Solo," Vragril said.

Chewbacca rose. On his way out he passed close to the Kdruajb's table but the reptile appeared to ignore the Wookiee.

"Thanks, Vragril," Han said.

"It's always a pleasure doing business with you." Vragril turned serious. "Han, I've heard that Jabba the Hutt's put a high price on your head, my friend."

Luke started, surprised at the revelation. He wondered why the bounty.

"Yeah, I know. I've already taken care of one of his people. But Jabba wants me alive. If I'm dead he won't get his money. I've got it...just haven't had time to get it back to Tatooine."

"Well, I've heard of strangers asking questions since the ${\it Falcon}$ put into port."

"Thanks for the warning." Han glanced at Luke, motioning toward the door with his head. "Why don't you return to this ship and help Chewie get ready for departure."

"What about you?"

"I've got something to do. Just be ready to take off as soon as I get there." $% \begin{center} \end{center} \begin{center} \$

"Nothing doing," Luke replied decisively. He had a bad feeling about what was waiting for Han outside.

"You've got the tape and General Rieekan has got to get it," Han argued.

"I gave it to Chewie just before he left," Luke answered smugly.

Han glared at him, anger flashing in the hazel eyes. Luke swallowed convulsively. If looks could kill, he reckoned he would be dead by now.

"Kid --"

"I'm going with you."

Han sighed. "Have it your way."

As they strode past the Kdruajb's table, Luke noticed the alien nursing a drink and watching them very intently, if surreptitiously. He sensed, rather than saw, the reptile get up to follow them.

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In common with most port cities, the narrow, dingy streets surrounding the Lace Goiley were brightly lit and crowded. Luke loosened the blaster on his weapons belt, resting a hand lightly on it, before he and Han entered the throng. Couples jostled them as they set a swift pace through the crowd.

After they had walked several blocks, there was a lessening in the number of people they passed, fewer restaurants and cantinas. Instead, the streets were lined with small stores, closed for the night, interspersed with a few mean-looking residences.

Finally they were alone. All Luke could hear was the click of their boot heels on the uneven pavement. The sense of danger he had felt all day grew stronger. He looked back and thought he saw

someone duck into the shadows but he could not be certain. The small hairs on the back of his neck stood up and his mouth grew dry. He walked on, ignoring his jittery nerves.

The approached a dark alley which reeked of garbage. It appeared empty and would afford some cover if necessary. Once again Luke spared a moment to glance over his shoulder.

"This alley should bear left to the spaceport about a hundred meters from here," Han whispered.

"I thought you were going after that guy?"

"I changed my mind," Solo replied, with a slight touch of annoyance. "Any sign of pursuit, Luke?"

"None, but I don't like it, Han. I think that Kdruajb called for help."

"We can't worry about that now, kid. Let's get going."

They started off again. Suddenly, the sound of heavy footsteps from somewhere behind them was clearly audible.

"I think our friend has found us," Han commented grimly, quickening his pace.

Luke and Han hurried on. As they reached the next turn, a figure stepped out from behind a large receptacle, blaster drawn. They skidded to a stop, their escape cut off by the Kdruajb's associate, weapon in hand. He smiled menacingly, only a few paces in front of them.

"It isss a pleasssure to meet you at lassst, Missster Ssssolo," the Kdruajb hissed. Luke and Han whirled to face him. "I've been looking for you for ssssome time. Jabba the Hutt will pay a premium for you."

"Now, wait a minute. I've got Jabba's money. It's on the Falcon," Han said rapidly. "If you'll let me get it --"

"Tell that to Jabba. Maybe if you pay him, he'll let you live."

"And my friend?"

The reptile looked closely at Luke, as if trying to identify him and discover if there was a bounty out for him as well.

"I have no usssse for your companion. He may go." The Kdruajb exchanged a glance with his cohort. Luke swallowed his rising tension. He must allow the Force to guide him.

"Luke --"

"Han, I'm staying with you," he said stubborn-ly.

"And what good will that do?"

"Nothing, I suppose," he admitted reluctantly.

"Then get out of here, kid."

Luke nodded and turned away from the Corellian.

"Hand over your blassster, Ssssolo, butt firsssst."

The second Kdruajb stepped closer to Luke and extended a clawed hand toward him. A chill, like death, swept over him. Suddenly, Luke knew the truth....

He tensed. Then, feeling the Force flowing within him, he relaxed, allowing it to take control. He whipped out his lightsaber and ignited it in one fluid motion. Everything around him slowed down, became surreal. Before the guard could cry out, he was dead, cut into two symmetrical steaming halves by the clean blue beam of the saber. Luke pivoted to take care of the leader. The bounty hunter lay on the ground...dead. There was a gaping hole in the Kdruajb's chest. Han stood over the body, blaster in hand. Luke shook his head, freeing himself of the last wispy trace of the trance.

"Good work, kid." Han slapped him on the shoulder. Luke glanced up to see the Corellian's look of surprised approval. "Let's get going. Chewie'll be wondering what kept us."

Luke stared a moment at the havoc before turning to follow Solo. $\,$

Walking back to the docking day, Luke could not wipe the images from his mind. He kept seeing the bodies lying on the ground. A shudder rippled through his body.

"I killed him," Luke stated unbelieving.

"Huh?"

"I killed him," Luke repeated softly.

"Yeah, and probably saved my life."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn't. I...I feel sick and...and dirty ...and..."

"Listen, kid, killing is a serious matter. It's necessary sometimes, like today, but it's still a dirty business. Very few people like doing it and you wouldn't want to know them."

"Graarahaar grraw raarwo."

Chewbacca's voice snapped Luke back to reality; they had arrived at the *Millennium Falcon*.

"We had a run in with a bounty hunter. Tell you about it later. Is the Falcon ready to go?"

"Aaaaaaarrrraahr groworrrar yra."

Sitting behind Solo and the Wookiee, Luke could not take his eyes off the Corellian. He had known instinctively that Han lived a dangerous life, always dodging the Imperials. But this...a price on his head, hunted like a wild animal because he was a little late in paying off a debt. It seemed incredible to him. Yet it was true. Never take

anything at face value.

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The Falcon had been cleared for take-off as Vragril had promised. When the bustle of getting space-borne was over, Han turned to Luke.

"Where are we supposed to rendezvous?"

"Set course for the Hoth system."

Han punched a few buttons on the navi-computer and the ${\it Millennium\ Falcon}$ leaped into hyperspace.

YODA'S THEME

Learning to feel; Miracles are real: Reach out for the highest you can be.

Never deny; Do more than just try; Live as one with all there is to see.

There is more to be than just a man alone.
There's a universe of sharing to be done.
There is time to bring a harmony to all those who can join with it.

Hold out your heart; You have made a start; You have reached the starlight from the sand.

Now open more; There's an open door; All the universe is in your hand.

Fern Marder



THE WAY BACK HOME

DENISE TATHWELL

the passage is dark. illumination comes from a muted light, compelling me to move onward. the ground, so soft that walking is a new experience. so quiet. so peaceful.

the blackness is changing to shadows as the light becomes brighter. i have no sense of fear. no curiosity. no anxiety. just...peace.

there is something i should remember. something terribly important but -- it doesn't seem to matter anymore. nothing matters. i see only the light as i near the end of my journey.

something moves. the form of a man, arms outstretched is beginning to solidify before my eyes.

the figure stands before the light, illuminating it, yet obscuring details. i feel i should know him. i feel i belong with him.

You must come no further, brother.

sam?!? is that you?

Yes, little brother. It's me.

oh sam, i've missed you so much. please let me come closer.

No, Jim. Your time has not yet come.

but i want to be with you, sam. together, like it used to be.

We will be together again -- someday -- but not now. You must go back. Your life task is not complete. When the times comes, I'll be here.

the light is fading. it's fading. I can hear Sam calling me in the distance -- Come on, Jim. You can make it. Don't give up. My feet are beginning to feel heavy. My head is pounding with the rhythm of my heart. I'm being pulled back from the light, into the cold darkness.

I feel great pain. Why doesn't Sam save me from the pain?

"Blood pressure rising, Doctor. 60/40."

I can't stand much more of this. I'm alone. No light -- no life.

"Cordrazine, 3 mgs."

Something is happening. I feel a presence close by. A light. I want to go back. Away from the pain. Sam, help me!

"Open your eyes, Jim. You're safe now. Come on...come on, Jim. Open your eyes."

Patches of blue swiftly move around me. I hear -- the steady rhythm of -- something.

"Vital signs stable, Doctor."

"Good. Discontinue life support. Decrease infusions to $100\ \text{ccs."}$

I know that voice. If I could only speak -- "Bones?"

"Yes, Jim. You're in Sickbay. You're home. Just relax."

"Doctor, the K-3 factor is still above normal."

Something touched me again. Warmth at last... and the pain is gone.

"Bones. Where's Sam?"

"Go to sleep, Jim. You need to save your strength. I'll be close by."

The lights are blurring again. Sounds are becoming muffled. I feel the warmth of someone's hand on mine. I am safe. I am home.

000000

Dr. Leonard McCoy scanned the body functions above the bed and started to feel the exhaustion that follows an adrenalin surge. That was too close.

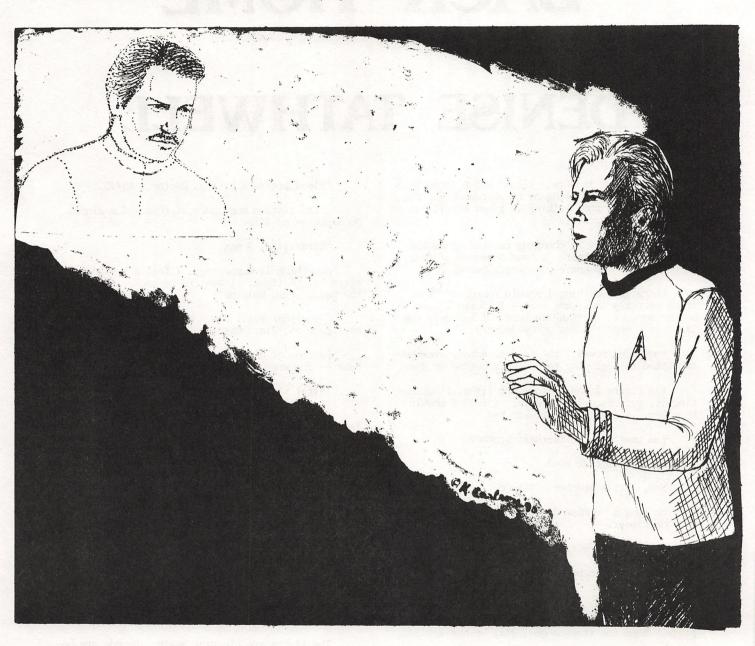
"Well, Doctor?" $\,$ McCoy turned to meet Spock's concerned eyes.

"He's back from the dead, Spock. Literally. I'm not ashamed to say that I didn't think he would make it...this time. There's only so much that medicine can do."

He turned back to look at his friend sleeping

peacefully. "Someday we might not be so lucky."

"Slow down, Sam! I can't run that fast!" The two boys raced to the lake, the elder slightly in front of the smaller boy. They reached the water, panting in exhaustion but enjoying every minute. "Someday you'll catch up with me, little brother. Someday."



Portrait In Miniature

Jean L. Stevenson

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T'Nym fled into the Council Gardens, her knapsack swinging from only one shoulder strap. She ached for the mountains, for the desert, for anywhere but here, where too many people made too much noise. The knapsack dragged her to the left and she followed the sandy path between neat rows of pebbles to a familiar bench. This part of the garden had not changed since her own ki'farr: truth, it had not altered in centuries. Latis and ferli cushioned her feet. The fruit tree shaded her head when she sat down. And solitude embraced her.

Automatically, her hands found the soothing shape of stylus and sketch-board in their part of the travel-pack, and leaning back, she closed her eyes...and remembered. The sun setting green on the far horizon of the Sasashar, the hunting cry of a le matya, scurriers, flying-ones, burrowers: all were her companions in the beauty of the world outside the cities of her people.

The sound of someone entering the garden brought her upright with mental and physical pain. She had chosen apartness in her life and should not have had to approach others -- and the need for mental barriers -- ever again. They had her art. Must they destroy her mind in the name of Family?

Why had Sarek summoned this ki'farr? The children of her generation had all been introduced to the family and each other many years before. It was time for the third birthing of her parents' bonding to take place; and that child's ki'farr would not be for three years at least. Why call her now from the mountains?

Yet even as she voiced the thought, she knew the answer. This was her uncle's first-born and was thus of Nym's generation. And his young Earthling wife had given him this child against all reason and logic -- against T'Pau's wishes, too, if the words of those around her in the Family had the right of it.

Breathless with the pang of that combination of joy and sorrow, T'Nym frowned down at the sketch-board, covered with visual representations of the hill-life of her earlier thoughts, and then erased the expression from her face.

The interlopers -- she could sense two minds -- were coming nearer.

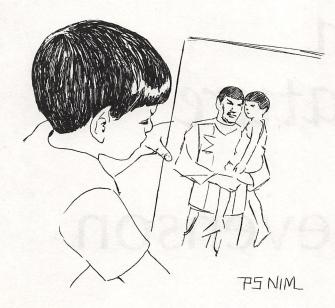
Sarek rounded a bush, holding the 'honored child' in his arms. The boy's face she could not see, hidden as it was against his father's shoulder. Strong young arms and legs reached only partway around the parent's neck and waist, respectively. And a sound came muffled from the taut young body.

Pain exploded in Nym's mind and the garden disappeared from around her. <u>Air...breath...life...</u> warmth...escape...please!...safety.

Awareness returned slowly and when Nym opened her eyes, the boy -- her cousin -- had ceased his tears. He twisted in his father's arms, looking around with a scowl of concentration furrowing the tiny brow. His gaze sought hers and questioning brown eyes stripped her soul and clothed it again in dignity and...love. She caught her breath.

Another moment and he fought free of the arms holding him. He marched on long, sturdy legs to her side and fixed a wary regard on her drawing pad.

"That's me," he announced. "And that is Father."



Past startlement at the easy collusion between her skilled fingers and her subconscious mind, $\ensuremath{\mathsf{Nym}}$

glanced down. "Yes, it is."

"Who are you?"

It came without pretense. Either he did not know or did not know to care that this gathering of cousins could deny his birthright.

"I am T'Nym, young sir. How are you called?"

"I am called Spock," he said, more solemnly this time. He had learned that lesson, then, of self-awareness and dignified presentation.

She looked up and past him to meet her uncle's black, unanxious gaze. If Sarek felt concern that his son had entered the garden in tears, it did not show.

The boy's attention had wandered to the discarded sketch-board and he traced the outline of an Xkapar wing with one finger. Then he glanced at her again; and she was decided.

"Ki nimn farr, Spock," she greeted. "I am your eldest first-cousin. Come, let us join the gathering. There are others of the clan who would greet you."

There were those who did not appreciate the child's outworlder blood; but T'Nym -- already legend in her own right -- stood beside him, and he became one of the Family...forever.

Winged Dreams

I had a dream the other night, my friend.
We were both astride white-winged stallions
galloping through the universe.
I was in the lead, and you...close on my heels.
The stars around us were brilliant-Supernovas casting white-hot light down on our bodies
And there was no one else in our universe.
Nothing but you and me -- and the stallions.

We rode until time seemed to stop
And there was nothing left to see or conquer.

I was like a shaft of light
You were my shadow -- or perhaps my reflection.

Nothing could touch us
We were immortal
And you were smiling.

Jeanne Cloud

THE CLONE-MASTER

Eileen Roy

The Imperial ship whispered that night. Voices pleaded. Questioned. Knew. The clone-master sat at her station, feeling each line like a spider's song, tugging at her.

"Avenger firing, mark seven."

"Clean hit. She can't last... She's doubling back, she's doubling back!"

"Veer off, *Protector*, veer--" Sound through the net. Metal screaming. Fifty-six clicks died. Thirty-two droids. Some bios.

She heard it all.

From the planet Linetoine she heard: "Get that unit on its feet. Move it, move it." "Grunt-face, who does he think--" "I hope we get fed today."

From the pseudosphere Imperium I she heard: "Secret messages? I don't know to what you refer. A protocol droid has-- No--!" A scream. A death.

From the planet Dagobah she heard: "Wet. Slimy. Snakes and monsters and $\underline{\text{strange}}$ dwarf bios. And he wants me to wait here alone?"

She took it all.

A predecessor told her: "We marched in rhythm, thirty thousand strong, Empress Clelata at our head. Ah, but then the wars came..."

A successor told her: "We tracked down the last rebel base at last. Losses of ten to one,

but we wiped them out."

Another, or the same successor, told her at the same time: "The Imperial forces battle strongly, but the rebels push them back on all sides--"

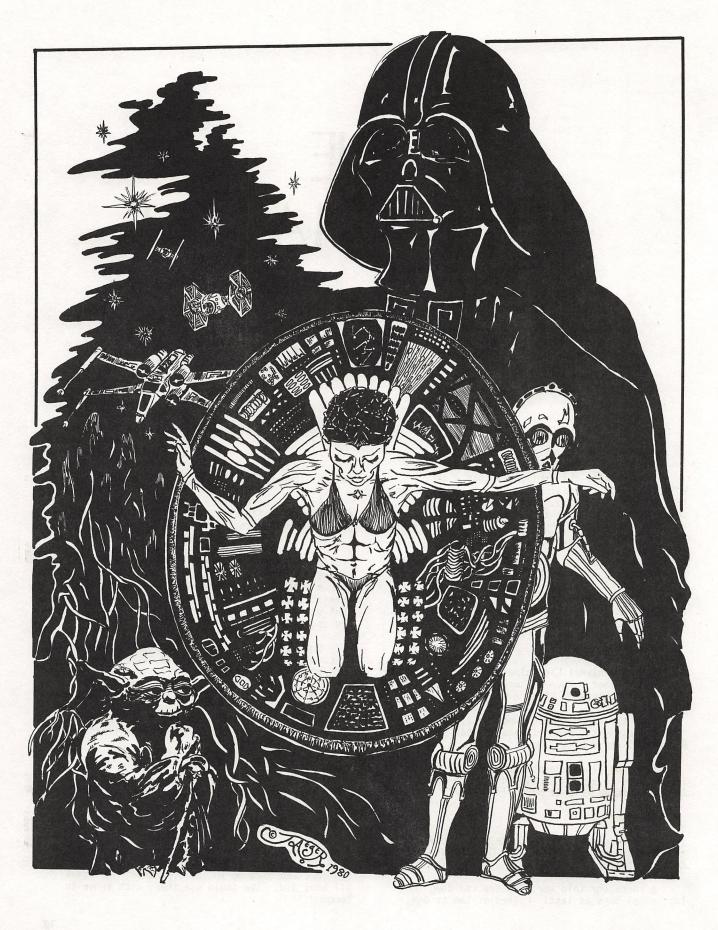
She wove it all together. Past and futures, droids and clicks, the next room and one thousand parsecs distant, she roamed through metal voices like a seer. She was the clone-master. Link between clicks -- the clones -- and bios, with a mind that one bare year of service would leave destroyed and useless.

Ordinary ship functions went through her board, of course, along with everything else. They were not yet important. She adjusted nutrient levels for click boxes, her sensor attachments resting in the computer banks. She warmed up fifty new units, forcegrowing a hundred more. She ordered the transfer of genetaps from overcrowded Wanto Sector to Rhessel, where unexpectedly heavy losses had--

She turned at the sound of the door.

She nodded, beginning the process.

"If only admirals could be created that easily." The bio leaned against the wall. Sweat on his forehead gleamed in the overheads. He stank. All bios did. "We could use them, with Vader in command."



"How goes the battle?" she inquired politely. He shrugged.

"Chasing a smuggler through an asteroid belt--" A ship died. Clicks. Droids. Bios. Steel and blood. Dead. "--glad when we're back at Imperium. Oh. Message for you, from the genebanks. Your replacement will be waiting."

She contemplated her fingertips. They trembled. "Good."

"Yeah. Well, that's a click. Short life, but a busy one."

Tie fighters screamed off. Three, four of them, shrieking their primitive war song. There was an asteroid. One Tie gone.

Another.

"You don't feel death at all, do you?"

Abstracted, she reached into her short store of human expressions for the appropriate response. "Excuse me?"

"No. You don't feel it at all." For a moment they stared at each other, the clone and the man, a chasm deeper than space between. He turned to go.

The last two Ties exploded.

She forgot him.

The night whispered quietly on. She listened. Adapted. Controlled when necessary. She was in the hold of a rebel ship, hiding in not-quite an asteroid. She looked through the eyes of an honor guard as Vader passed, clean and dark and flowing. She wiped sludge off sensor plates while a wizened creature riddled. She sat among councils of the past. She heard the futures coming.

There was a legend, whispered among genetaps, that every clone-master had one decision, above all others, to make. Hers was close upon her.

A cowl, black, metal-hissing. Marching onward and upward to power and glory overflowing. Or two

old, sad eyes, watching heroes battle nightmares.

"Notify the Sith Lord! The Falcon has reappeared, we are pursuing."

"I can see the edge of the asteroid field, sir... The Falcon has lost rear deflectors."

"Right bank, fire!"

She monitored ship's functions. Spooled learning tapes into click boxes. Sent repair droids to an asteroid rip near the bow. Listened again to the story of Empress Clelata and the Clone Wars. Her fingertips trembled.

She was so tired.

Soon, now.

"The ship doesn't appear on any of our scopes."

"Turn around, scan the area one more time."

Decide. Now. Decide.

She let the garbage hatch open. Hidden among refuse, dead droids, old boxes, the *Millennium Fal-con* tumbled out and away.

Across the galaxy and a future which now might be, Yoda lifted his head and looked at her, along channels no bio should know. Or perhaps it was her, intruding upon a plane where clicks had no place at all.

A battalion of clones marched on Imperial orders. Died.

"Please," she asked him.

The droids did their duties. Ships set their blind course. And metal always obeyed.

"Someday. Someday--"

At Imperium, her replacement waited.

"Tell us why?"



Grey, wet clinging rain
Skies weeping
Icy tears of pain
Upon the Earth that covers thee
As thou lies in thy final sleep.
And I stand here
Beside thy grave
My tears flowing like the rain
Down my cheeks to drown
My pain.

Gene S. Delapeñia

THE MAN ON

THE BRIDGE

Sitting in this chair...
Most times I love it.

It's what I wanted all my life,
To be a starship captain.
I knew that I could be the best
Of that unique breed of men...
Most times I'm sure I've succeeded.

To command other people,
You must first be in command
Of yourself.
To win their respect, their loyalty,
You must first respect yourself.
And if your crew is to have
Confidence in you,
Then you must first be self-confident...
Most times I have all these qualities.

But I've also learned
That these good points
Must be combined with
A certain...ruthlessness...
To make a good commander.
To send people to certain death...
To remain aloof from their everyday problems...
To shield yourself from their Humanity...
Most times I can be ruthless, too.

And that's why
Sometimes it's lonely
Sitting in this chair.

Ellen L. Kobrin

True to the Blood

Carol Mularski

A Desert Seed Story

They sure look like they're enjoying themselves, the young woman thought as she watched a group of her comrades cavorting in the water and on the wet sand of the ocean shore. Maybe I should try swimming too -- but it seems so strange.

Kaili sighed, drawing her legs up against her body, resting her chin on her knees. This whole planet was strange -- tiny outcroppings of land in an endless blue ocean, weird plants and animals, air pressure and humidity so high she could hardly breathe. Everyone else calls Dantooine a paradise, she thought, slapping at an insect on her back. I'd take old hell-hole Tatooine anyday -- if I could....

"Hey, Kai!" a loud bass voice boomed behind her, nearly causing her to jump off the flat granite boulder that was her vantage point.

"You $\underline{\text{could}}$ make a little noise when you sneak up on a person," she scolded as she resettled herself.

"Why should I? It's fun to scare you," Gerel Merd grinned, coming nearer and leaning against her rock. "Why aren't you down there with everyone else?"

Kaili shrugged and turned away from him, to resume gazing at the beach and its occupants.

"I see you got yourself some more appropriate clothes for this climate, at least," Merd continued, scanning her slim figure approvingly. "Finally got tired of sweltering in those desert whites, eh?"

She glanced down at the makeshift halter and shorts she'd cut and sewn from her Tatooine attire. "I guess I won't need them anymore, will I?" she said wistfully.

"'Bout time you realized that. C'mon, why don't you at least try wading on the shore? It's a better way to spend a holiday than sitting around."

"I don't want to, Gerel!" She pulled away as her fellow Tatooiner grabbed her arm. "How about going away and leaving me alone!"

Merd's full face took on a somber, thoughtful expression as he regarded her. "What's the problem, Kai? You're always moping around."

"Nothing's the problem," she snapped. Calming, she rested her head on her knees again. "Gerel, don't you ever feel homesick?"

"Yes, I do," he replied. "I worry about my family, and hope they didn't take my disappearance too hard. That's only normal. But I made a commitment to the Alliance, made it with my life, Kai. Didn't you?"

"Of course, I did." Her voice sounded unconvinced, even to herself.

Gerel eyed her speculatively for a moment before continuing. "Okay, then. We all have adjustment problems, but if our dedication is real, they'll resolve themselves eventually. Right? Meanwhile, I'll keep on working hard, and enjoying any holidays the psychologists and commanders give us. And you should too. So, come on, and try swimming." He took her hand and pulled her completely off her boulder seat.

Kaili dug her heels into the soft earth and hooked her arm about a nearby palm tree to keep him from hauling her closer to the shore. "Quit being so blasted pushy, Gerel! I told you I don't want to!"

Merd scowled at her. "All right, all right!" He freed her hand. "Where's Brett?"

"He's playing cards with some of his friends. Why?"

"Because I think he should talk some sense into you. I can't."

Kaili climbed back onto her rock. "Oh, leave me alone."

"I intend to," he retorted. He turned and stalked down the gentle slope. Kaili watched as he stopped to speak to a man who was leaving the beach; then he dropped his towel and plunged into the foaming waves.

How could Gerel be so at ease with this alien environment? He'd been born on Tatooine, same as she had. Why didn't it seem strange to him to be here, surrounded by turbulent water instead of by billowing sand? She glanced behind her at the dormant volcano towering at her back. In geologic ages past it had formed this island; now it concealed the infant rebel Alliance's main base.

Dantooine was even further out on the Rim than Tatooine, well away from the mainstream of galactic traffic. That, plus the fact that its only known resources were plentiful and cheaper to acquire in other parts of the Empire, made it unfrequented and an ideal headquarters for the new rebellion.

The hangars, communication center, work areas, and command headquarters were located in a huge natural cave at the base of the mountain, which had been enlarged by laser drilling. Most base personnel lived outside the cavern in cabins built from local material. That was another thing that made Kaili nervous: after the security of Tatooine's underground lifestyle, she felt unprotected in the flimsy wooden shacks, especially during the frequent tropical storms.

Kaili hugged her legs and sighed. She'd have to get used to it eventually. It was other aspects of her new life that were harder for her to adjust to.

When she'd left Tatooine, she had felt she had a fairly good grip on methods of machine repair and maintenance, and could pick up mechanical engineering easily. But it had turned out to be much more complicated than she'd expected. Brett and the other experts were constantly teaching her new theory and techniques, until she was sure her head would burst.

Even this pressure would be bearable, if she could be easy in her mind about her family. She felt so <u>guilty</u> about the manner of her departure

from Tatooine. Almost every night she'd dream about one or more of the people she'd abandoned, feeling what they felt, and allowing their sense of loss to overwhelm her.

Kaili dropped her head on her knees and rocked her body back and forth. What have I done? Is our cause really worth my family's happiness? I thought it was...now I'm not as sure anymore.

Again her somber musings were interrupted. She smiled and relaxed as a gentle arm went about her waist, and tilted her head back to kiss Brett Karaga, her husband of three months.

"Is something wrong, Kai?" he said as she slid over to make room for him on her rock. "You looked like you were about ready to cry just now."

She shook her head. "I was thinking, that's all. Is your sabacc match over?"

"No, but I was losing so badly that Gerel's message was a good excuse to get out of the game."

"Gerel's message?"

"He asked Ike to tell me you were looking a little upset."

"I wish Gerel would mind his own business!" she said, scowling.

"He's just concerned about you -- and so am I. Kaili, why don't you try learning to swim?" He nodded toward the people on the beach. "It's good exercise, and lots of fun. If you want, I'll go in with you."

She sighed. "I can't get used to the idea. At home, we used water only for drinking and cooking. It seems wasteful -- and scary -- to put my whole body in it."

"This isn't Tatooine. Besides, Gerel sure doesn't seem to mind the water."

"Well, he lived in Bestine. The people in the towns never had to be as careful about water as we were on the farm. Besides...."

Brett waited a few seconds, but when she didn't continue, he said, "Besides what?"

In a small voice, she answered, "Gerel's always wanted to get away from home. I'd never given it a thought, myself, until you came along."

Brett drew her closer and stared out over the ocean, remaining silent for a while. Finally he said, "All right, how about doing some other things? Some of the other women were hanging rope swings today, and playing games too. You could try to be more sociable, Kai."

"I have tried. But they talk about things I've never heard of, and when I ask questions, some of them treat me like a rimworld hick. Which I am."

Brett seemed about to reply, but was interrupted by a loud whining sound coming from above. They both stood and shaded their eyes to scan the sky,

and spotted a large freighter passing overhead on its way to a plateau just outside the main hangar entrance.

"That must be the supply ship we've been waiting for." He grabbed her hand and started down the jungle path that led toward the main base. "I've heard it's bringing in some new personnel from Alderaan. And," he added, winking at her, "there's a few surprises in it for you, too."

"What kind of surprises?" she panted, trying to keep up with him.

He slowed his pace a bit. "Sorry -- I forgot you have trouble catching your breath. I ordered some clothes for you, things that'll look nicer and feel better than those rags you're wearing now."

"These aren't rags!"

He grinned at her. "No, not really. But I think you'll like my surprise anyway."

They covered the short distance to the base quickly, and arrived in the hangars as the freighter maneuvered itself into the cavern from the landing plateau. Brett moved toward it, but Kaili spotted one of the other mechanics working on a snub's fuel line. She detoured to help, and waved Brett on toward the newly-arrived starship as he started to follow her.

"What are you doing, working today, Jake?" she teased as she handed a clamp to the struggling tech. "This is supposed to be an off-day."

Jake finished applying sealant on the leak. "Well, it's no use losing all this fuel just because of a holiday," he said. "I saw it, I fixed it. We have precious little fuel as it is."

"That's for sure," Kaili said, examining the repair. "Well, this seems to be all right now. Let's go see if the freighter brought us anything useful."

They headed together through the crowded bay toward the starship. Kaili cast a cursory glance at the new recruits disembarking. She was craning her neck for a glimpse of her husband amidst the freight being unloaded when Jake nudged her and whistled through his teeth.

"Take a look at the beauty queen who just stepped off the ship!" he said. "The recruits get better all the time!"

Kaili followed his gaze, spotting a tall, exotic-looking woman with long dark hair, walking down the freighter's ramp. She nodded and was about to make a comment to Jake when the woman casually glanced about the bay, did a double-take, and called out, "Brett!" As the newcomer ran down the rest of the ramp and hurried toward the cargo area, Kaili said good-bye to her fellow mechanic and rushed away to find her husband.

Being short, Kaili had a hard time seeing over the heads of people, and so momentarily lost track of her quarry. Finally she dodged around a large packing crate, and found Brett -- just in time to see the beauty throw her arms about his neck and kiss him.

It seemed to Kaili that her husband was doing little to ward off this attention. She walked over to the couple, eyebrows raised.

"So this is where you disappeared to, Brett Karaga!" the dark-haired woman said as Kaili came within hearing range. "Why didn't you tell me you were joining the Alliance? I wouldn't have worried so much about you!"

"I couldn't, Janna...." he began to reply, then caught sight of Kaili, who had stopped a few feet away. Reddening, he reached up and loosened the woman's arms, turning her around to face his wife.

"Kai, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine from Andera University. Janna \forall ihn. Janna, this is my wife, Kaili."

Janna's dark eyes widened in shock. She looked Kaili over, as if trying to see what attraction she held for Brett. Kaili, meanwhile, had taken in the tall woman's oval, perfect-featured face and sumptuous figure. She'd never felt so short, skinny, and pale in her entire life.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Kaili," Janna said, then continued, "Brett, this <u>is</u> a surprise. You always told me you weren't the marrying type."

"Well, Kai here made me change my mind," he said, putting his arm about his wife's shoulders and smiling down at her. Kaili was not particularly reassured by the gesture. A feeling of insecurity she hadn't realized existed gnawed at her.

Janna scrutinized Kaili again. "I don't remember seeing you around school, Kaili. Where did you two meet?"

"I'm from Tatooine, near Mos Eisley. We met there."

"Tatooine? Stars, Brett, what were you doing there? Nothing there but smugglers and dew gatherers -- and lots of sand."

"My \underline{father} 's one of those 'dew gatherers'!" Kaili snapped.

Brett squeezed her shoulder and interrupted smoothly. "I was assigned to Tatooine as an information liaison for the Alliance. Those smugglers came in pretty handy. And the planet's not as backward as we've always heard, Janna. There are lots of hardworking, energetic people on Tatooine."

"Hmm. And what do you do here, Kaili?"

"I'm a mechanic. Brett's also teaching me engineering." $\,$

Janna looked a bit crestfallen, but recovered quickly. "I'm an engineer too -- Brett and I took all our classes together. We were close friends."

Kaili slid out from under her husband's arm. She could no longer stand the beauty's low-pitched, musical insinuations. Be reasonable -- she's never



actually said they were more than friends, part of her scolded. But it didn't help.

"I'll leave you two to your reunion," she said, and stalked away. She heard Janna say to Brett, "She's very good at the cold shoulder treatment, isn't she?" That made her angrier and she walked faster, leaving the hangars and the main base. Soon she reached her cabin, and threw herself face down on the soft floor padding that served as a bed.

After a while Kaili heard footsteps approaching the cottage. The door opened, and Brett entered, tossing a box onto the packed dirt floor nearby before sitting down next to her. She didn't move.

"All right, Kai, it's time to cut the child-ishness."

At that she rolled onto her back and glared at him. "I was trying to nap."

"Sure, sure," he said sarcastically. "By the way, you do that emotional projection bit quite well."

"What are you talking about?"

"If looks could freeze, both Janna and I would've been icicles. I thought you didn't know anything about using the Force."

"Don't be ridiculous. That was just your own guilty conscience!" $\,$

Brett was controlling his temper with difficulty. "What do I have to be guilty about?"

"She's an old school friend -- of <u>course</u> I was glad to see her. And she wasn't 'rubbing'."

Kaili sniffed. "An old girlfriend, more like. I know you lived with her."

Brett's mouth dropped open, then he frowned. "Okay, so I did -- although why you just $\frac{assumed}{and\ over}$ that, I don't know. But that's all past $\frac{and\ over}{and\ over}$ with, Kaili."

She remained silent. He stretched out next to her and took her in his arms. "Janna's a beautiful, intelligent girl, but she <u>can</u> be arrogant. I'm sorry she upset you. I asked her to please be more careful about what she says in the future." He smiled. "She certainly wasn't the type of person I wanted to spend my life with. I married <u>you</u>."

Kaili thought about that, then sighed and tried to smile. "I'm sorry, Brett, I \underline{am} being childish. I guess it's hard for me to accept ideas that are so different from my own."

Brett chuckled. "Maybe you're a little provincial, but you'll get over it in time. Don't worry, Kai -- I like blonde hair and blue eyes better than brown, anyway."

"You read me so well. Are you sure <u>you</u> don't know anything about the Force?"

"Positive. But I do know you." He kissed her and smoothed her hair away from her face. "Feeling better now?" She nodded. "Good. Why don't you take a look at what I bought you?"

Kaili opened the box he had brought from the freighter, and was delighted to find shorts sets and a pastel-blue, Alderaani-style robe. But the last item she lifted from the box gave her pause.

Brett looked at her anxiously as she held the swimsuit up. "Do you like it, Kai?"

"It's very pretty," she said noncommitally.

"Are you going to use it?"

"I don't know."

"I wish you would."

She didn't reply.

He went on, "I think you might adapt better if you tried to enjoy this climate, instead of fighting it. What do you think?"

Silence.

"Maybe you should ease into it gradually. Try taking a water shower, instead of a sonic." He grinned. "Come on, I'll go with you."

Kaili pulled away as he took her hand. "Brett, no. The very idea seems...seems obscene!"

Brett lost patience again. "You sure don't seem to think sleeping with me is obscene! This is no different."

"I don't mean it that way, and you know it! It seems a sin to waste water like that."

"Kaili, Dantooine is <u>ninety-six percent</u> water! When will you get that through your head?"

She turned away from him. Behind her, Brett said, "Sometimes I wonder if you even $\underline{\text{want}}$ to fit in here."

"All right, all right. I'll try taking a water shower."

"Well, don't sound so enthusiastic! Forget it, Kai. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do."

She sighed, and faced him contritely. "Don't be angry. It's...it's just that I'm very confused about a lot of things right now."

He nodded, and reseated himself on the floor padding, motioning her to sit beside him. When she had complied, he said, "I know -- and I should have tried to get you talking about this long ago. But I've always had a bad habit of hoping that if I ignore a problem, it'll go away."

"That's the way I am, too. Besides, I really

thought it would go away, but so far.... Brett, I'm worried about my family. If I could just feel that they're all right, maybe everything else would fall into place."

"We've all had to leave families behind. We adjust to the loss in time, and so do the folks back home, I'm sure. You're no different."

"I think I am, though."

"In what way?"

"I keep dreaming about them, seeing different things happening that are the results of my running away. Papa is getting more and more grouchy, and it's making Mama terribly unhappy. Sometimes I dream about her crying, because of the way Papa is now, and because she's worried about me. I've seen Luke kicking vaporators, or the speeder, because he couldn't fix them right and I wasn't there to show him. And my brother Wynn gets mad because Mama and Papa wouldn't let him have my room for his own, and because Papa won't let him go any farther away from home than Anchorhead. And I feel Luke really missing me when --"

"Hold it, Kai." Brett interrupted the torrent of words. "These are only <u>dreams</u>. You shouldn't let them upset you so."

"But they seem so real -- and they won't go away."

Brett remained silent, thinking, for a long time. At last, he said slowly, "When I asked you to join the Alliance and leave Tatooine, I thought you'd get used to everything eventually, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was wishful thinking on my part because I wanted you so much."

Kaili lowered her head as sudden tears ran down her cheeks. "I feel so tight inside all the time." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think I made a big mistake, coming here."

Brett grasped her shoulders and lifted her chin. "Kai, can't you let the future we're trying to build motivate you to try to adjust? Before we left Tatooine, you seemed to have the commitment you needed."

"I thought so too. But right now it seems so abstract, and not very important." She shrugged. "It's all so far in the future."

"How can you call it <u>abstract?</u> Your own uncle was murdered by the Empire. All your life your family's been afraid of someone discovering Luke's Jedi background."

"It's something we've learned to live with."

Brett sighed. "Well, you're here now, you'll have to learn to live with this, too."

"I know."

"Kaili, please try to stop looking back. You've got to start to live in the present and for the future. Believe me, you'll feel happier, and you'll certainly make me happier. That's important to you, isn't it?"

Kaili hugged him, and wiped her tears. "Of course it is. But it's easier to say than to do."

Brett stroked her hair, staring out the window at the single setting sun. Finally he looked down at her and tried to smile. "It's almost time for dinner. Put on your new dress, and we'll go to the base. I hear there's going to be some entertainment this evening in honor of the new recruits. We'll enjoy the rest of the holiday, and talk more about our problems tomorrow. All right?"

Kaili nodded; the prospect of the evening's diversions was welcome. "Maybe I'll start feeling better tomorrow." But as she changed her clothes, she had a feeling that her problem was too deepseated to be vanquished by a few hours' diversion.

Kaili went through the next few days in a fog. She did her work competently, but absent-mindedly, and Gerel Merd continually nagged her to come out of her "mental hyperspace". More and more she fixated on the idea that she'd trapped herself into a life for which she had no real dedication.

External events irritated her too. Assigned as Janna Vihn's "orientation companion," Kaili had to spend time with her, informing her of the Alliance's organization, policies, and procedures, and familiarizing her with base facilities. Janna, in turn, was assigned as Kaili's mechanical engineering tutor since Brett was now hard at work with the other senior engineers, designing mass conversion engines for the new X- and Y-wing fighters. Although Kaili soon conquered her jealousy of Janna, they were opposites in personality and temperament, and grated on each other's nerves.

Three days after the holiday, Kaili was hard at work overhauling a snub ship that had malfunctioned during a planetary patrol when she was summoned to the psychologist's office. Apprehensive, she quickly changed into a clean uniform and reported to Dr. Rekar.

Her unease increased when she found Brett, with a strange, blank expression on his face, already seated in the doctor's office. Dr. Rekar smiled at her, and motioned her to a seat. "How are you, Kaili? Been working hard?"

"Yes, sir." Her nervousness made her add, "Is something wrong?" $\,$

"Ah, I see you want to get right to the point. Nothing is wrong, Kaili. Your husband here has been in to talk to me about you, and to ask advice. And it just so happens that I was going to have you come in for a conference with me soon, anyway."

Kaili kept her eyes downcast and remained $\operatorname{si-lent}$.

"As you know," he continued, "I'm in charge of the mental health of this base's personnel -- a difficult task, considering the different cultures our people come from. Plus it's not easy to adapt to the rather unnatural lifestyle of a military base, especially when we're all under an automatic death sentence for defying the Empire. You've worried about that, haven't you?"

"Yes, very much."

"You wouldn't be normal otherwise. But you do believe all this stress is worth the effort from us, don't you?"

Dr. Rekar folded his hands on his lap. "Yes. We're united by a common purpose; we feel that we are doing what is right and necessary for the good of the galaxy. But, Kaili, you said that as if you were reciting a rote lesson, not as if you really believe in it."

"But I do believe in it, sir."

"With your head, yes, but are you sure you believe it in your heart? Maybe your heart is elsewhere, Maybe you're homesick, and you miss your family. What do you feel?"

Kaili sighed. Hesitantly she said, "Doctor, I don't feel as if I'll ever be able to get used to being away from home, not as long as my folks are worried about me."

"Ah, yes. Brett has told me a little about your dreams. He seems to think that you believe the dreams are also realities. Is he right?" At her nod, Dr. Rekar looked down at a clipboard he'd been holding on his lap, and swiveled his seat to consider a chart on the computer screen at his elbow. When he again looked up at the couple before him, he spoke gently, seemingly weighing each word. "Kaili, I've got the results of the psychological tests you took when you first arrived. One of the purposes of the tests is to predict whether or not a recruit will be able to adjust well and make a valuable contribution to our cause. In your case, the results were ambiguous. You've got various factors in your family background, your emotional make-up, and your life's experience that could tip the scales either way. I believe that the deciding factor will be your own free will -- whether you really want to adjust or not."

He put the clipboard aside. "I want you to know that you're not the first recruit who's had this problem. It's no disgrace to be unable to live as we must here on Dantooine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Kaili glanced sidewise at her husband, who was still sitting motionless and tense. "Uh...what did those other people do?"

"Some chose to stay here, and I hold frequent counseling sessions with them. Others have returned to their home planets and work for us, in espionage and information gathering and propaganda, in the environments that are most familiar and comfortable to them."

"But, sir, I've been told that it's risky to have people outside know much about the Alliance,

or the location of this base. If they were caught, or betrayed $\mbox{--}$ "

"You've put your finger on the main problem with this practice -- that's the chief objection General Dodonna and his staff had when I first proposed to release people from their obligation. But I feel that it is more dangerous to keep them here against their wills, than have an emergency arise, and have them panic when we need them most. If they don't have the strong ideals necessary to give up home and family and personal comfort, then all their skills are worthless to us." He gazed keenly at her. "Kaili, we need good mechanics and engineers like you. But we do not hold anyone prisoner here. You do have choices."

She looked at Brett again. "Uh...I think my situation's probably a bit more complicated than those other people's."

The doctor nodded. "That may very well be true. But whatever you decide to do, it's a decision you both must make...together." He stood, dismissing them. "You two talk this over. There's plenty of time. I'll see you -- together or separately -- whenever you need to talk again."

Brett and Kaili left Rekar's office, and walked silently away from the base to their cabin. Kaili's mind was spinning with conflicting emotions: relief that she wasn't "stuck" on Dantooine as she'd thought, curiosity about what Brett would say, confusion as to what course she should take, guilt at being the cause of her husband's obvious unhappiness.

After reaching their cottage, they sat down and faced each other across a small table. Each waited for the other to speak first. Finally Kaili said, with an effort, "What did you and Dr. Rekar talk about?"

"About you, of course, and what would happen if you decide to go, or to stay."

"If I decide to go, you'd come with me, would- n't you?"

"To Tatooine? I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I'm a known rebel there, remember?"

Kaili paused, pondering the situation. "Then I don't see how I have any choice."

Brett reached into one of his uniform's pockets and drew out two microtape cartridges. Slowly he handed one to Kaili.

"What's this?"

Silent, he shook his head, gestured at the tape reader on the table. $\;$

She pushed it into the slot of the tape reader. What she saw on the screen shocked her into momentary speechlessness. After a minute, she said hoarsely, "It's a divorce decree."

"Dr. Rekar said you might need to be totally free," Brett said, looking away from her. "Did you read the date on the decree?"

Kaili looked more closely at the document. "Why...it's dated a year from now!" She sat back in her chair and rubbed her temples. "You'll have to explain this, Brett. I don't understand."

"If you should decide to stay, Dr. Rekar and his staff will do everything they can to help you adapt to a rebel's life -- and so will I. Please believe that, Kai. I want you to stay."

Kaili glanced up at the first sign of emotion in his voice. For a moment his brown eyes reflected pleading and earnestness, they they went blank again.

"But if you decide to go, this will dissolve our marriage contract a standard year from now. I wanted it like this, to allow you some leeway, in case you change your mind again and want to come back." Brett sighed. "But Dr. Rekar told me to make it clear that this is a personal matter, between the two of us."

"I see." Kaili still felt dazed. "Dating the divorce a year ahead -- it's not really legal, is it?"

"Of course not. But if we sign and date it a year ahead, and the records computer isn't programmed 'til next year, it won't make that much difference, right?" He smiled slightly. "What the computer doesn't know it can't give an error message about."

Kaili scowled. "I don't see why you're being so flippant. This is $\underline{\text{serious}}$."

Brett's smile disappeared, and his face reddened in anger. "I \underline{know} this is serious. If you're so worried about strict legality, we could put the divorce through tomorrow!"

Kaili couldn't help herself, she started to cry. "I guess you want this. I...I have to admit I haven't been a very good wife, so far."

His anger evaporated, and he reached across the table for her hand. "I've tried to make it clear to you that I $\underline{\text{don't}}$ want it. But I don't want you to feel imprisoned by anything, not even by my love for you."

She nodded and tried to stifle her sobs as he went on. "I am willing to admit, though, that I may have made a mistake in recruiting you. I'm not a psychologist. I had no way of knowing that the cheerful, competent young woman I knew on Tatooine would turn homesick and insecure. I wanted you to come with me so much that even when you hesitated so long about joining, I didn't regard it as a warning signal. I'm sorry for that, Kai."

"Oh, Brett, it's not all your fault," she said miserably. "It's my fault, too -- I avoided making my decision until the last minute, then rushed right in. You're so dedicated to the Alliance cause, and I...I don't know if I can be or not." She paused, then said in a near-whisper, "We love each other, but maybe we're not right for each other."

Brett considered that, then drew her into his

lap. "Maybe," he said, sounding tired. "Then you \underline{do} want to leave?"

"I -- I guess I want to be able to step outside the situation and look at it more objectively. And I want to let my parents know I'm all right. Brett, maybe I will want to come back."

"It's easier said than done. There'll be many changes and upheavals here, as time goes on. The rebellion is keeping a low profile, for now, but the situation could heat up at any time. If you can't adjust when there's <u>no</u> danger, how will you cope with a war?"

"I don't know!" she said, tears rising in her eyes again. She rested her head on his shoulder. "You know, I'm beginning to realize what Dr. Rekar meant about factors in my family background. My father's people were always the type to settle down in one place all their lives. But Mama's family loved to travel and do exciting things, especially in space. That's why they named themselves 'Skywalker'." They both thought about that a while, then Kaili went on, more slowly, "Mama used to call me her 'Skywalker child' since I was always interested in the Jedi, and liked to try new experiences. But I guess she was wrong. I'm a Lars after all."

Morning was dawning over the city of Secten on the planet Jarelt, when the Alderaani freighter touched down at the Secten Spaceport. After the standard week's layover on Dantooine, this was its first stop on a circuitous route back to Alderaan.

Several people disembarked from the starship, but only one did not move purposefully toward the bay exits to run assigned errands. Kaili Karaga had no secret Alliance business to conduct, and she had no idea what she should do next to find her way back home to Tatooine.

She hugged herself and shivered in the damp cold of Secten's early spring morning and wished again that the Alliance ship had Tatooine on its itinerary. Reluctantly, she hoisted her backpack on her shoulder, feeling very lost and alone as she left the bay.

Threading the maze of narrow alleyways between the hundreds of docks, she eventually found her way to Port Terminal. The place was totally unlike any building that existed in Mos Eisley Spaceport and the sheer size of it threatened to overwhelm her. She decided to sit down on one of the benches for a moment.

Here in the entrance lobby, Secten Terminal spread out around her. The roof was at least five stories above her head, and all about her, beings from every planet and system she'd ever heard about -- and more -- milled back and forth in what seemed to be infinite confusion. The terminal's population made Mos Eisley's seem drab. Kaili wished she were there right now -- at least the old scumhole was familiar.

Maybe if Brett were here with me, I'd enjoy this experience, she thought. Then she scowled and berated herself for a fool. She'd had Brett with

her for three months during the new experience of Dantooine and the Alliance, and she'd still not enjoyed that. She closed her eyes and slumped on the bench, trying to put the bustle of the terminal out of her consciousness. But as her anxiety eased, the remorse she'd momentarily forgotten came flooding back.

The last sight she'd had of Brett's face, as she'd kissed him goodbye, would probably haunt her until the end of her days: a good, strong man, in desperate control of his emotions. The memory was worse than the dreams she'd had of her father, sitting by the garage dome at home, hugging Luke and squeezing back tears. Why do I wound the hearts of my loved ones? she thought. By the Maker, what's wrong with me?

At last she opened her eyes and rose from the bench, forcing the guilt to the back of her mind. She determined to make reservations for the trip home, and unload the burden of her family's bereavement. Picking her way through the turbulent crowd, she came at last to the travel counters.

After a half-hour wait in line it was her turn to speak to a reservations droid. "I want to get on the next flight to Tatooine."

"Do you have a preference as to spaceline company?" it asked.

"No, any of them will do. The sooner I can leave, the better."

The machine paused a second, consulting its memory banks. Then a boarding token emerged from a slot in its casing. "The next flight to Tatooine is on Standard Day 10-238, Time 16:20. Please deposit 350 credits in the fare box."

"Twenty-three days, five hours, thirteen minutes, to be precise."

"Don't you have anything sooner?"

"What's the hold-up here?" a human male voice behind the counter broke in.

Kaili looked up at the intruder. "Are you the manager?"

"Yes, miss. What's the problem?"

"Your droid won't give me a flight to Tatooine any sooner than a month from now. I want to leave immediately."

The man turned to a computer terminal and punched in a code. "Sorry, miss," he said. "The next flight to Mos Eisley Spaceport is SD 10-238 --"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." She stood there irresolutely.

Kaili gratefully accepted his offer. She walked along the counter until she came to an entrance, where the manager, Mr. Lokel by his name tag, met her and led her to his desk. As she sat down, he programmed his terminal for upcoming flights to Tatooine, and swiveled the screen around to face her. "You see? Not a one sooner than 10-238."

"What about doing a transfer?"

He programmed the computer again. "There's a starliner going to Radnin tomorrow, that connects with a Tatooine flight. But that flight's departure isn't until 10-241. And that's the quickest connection you could make from here."

"I don't understand why there aren't more flights."

Lokel smiled oddly. "Tatooine isn't exactly the galaxy's biggest tourist attraction, you know. Why are you going there?"

"I live there."

"Hmmm. Then why didn't you buy a round trip?"

She was beginning to get irritated with the man's somewhat condescending attitude. "Never mind. Lots of supply freighters go to Tatooine. Can't I find a place on one of those?"

"I'm afraid that registered freighters are not permitted to take on passengers. You could possibly get a private charter -- but it'd be extremely expensive, of course...if you could even find someone to charter."

She sighed and rose. "Well, thanks for your time. I'll have to think about it."

The manager eyed her. "If you're really in a hurry, it <u>might</u> be possible to pull a few strings with some private charter pilots...but there would be a small 'consideration', of course."

Kaili stared at him as it dawned on her that he was offering a less-than-legitimate arrangement. "No, thanks. I think it would be best if I figure out my own way home." She hurried away to the lobby, trying to shrug off the bad feeling she'd received from Lokel. She hoped he hadn't been too suspicious of her obvious rootlessness -- someone might start asking questions that were better left unasked.

Outside the terminal she paused a few seconds, trying to decide what to do next. Then she ran toward the docking area, in hopes of returning to the Alliance freighter before it left. Maybe she'd be able to get a good connection at its next destination; until then, she'd at least be with people she knew

In her haste, she made several wrong turns, and had to retrace her steps. At last she reached the correct bay, only to find that the Alderaani ship was gone, replaced by a Corellian freighter. She leaned against the berth entryway and stared at the ship, unable to believe that she was actually stranded, alone in a strange city on a strange

planet.

"What're ya doin' here, girlie?" a harsh voice said behind her.

She whirled to find a stocky, balding man, attired in spacer's jeans and vest -- and oversized blaster -- standing a few feet away. "Uh, nothing. I was looking for the ship that was here before yours. I'll leave now."

The man eyed her suspiciously, but let his hand drop from his holstered weapon. "That wasn't too smart, missin' your ship's take-off. Were you a crewer?"

"No. Excuse me." She turned and walked away as fast as she could, hoping the man wouldn't think she'd been spying on him. Apparently he didn't since she made it out of the bay alive.

She found her way out to the streets of the city, and sat down at a table in an outdoor cafe. Ordering a hot drink, she took stock of her situation. By the time her sola tea arrived, all she'd resolved to do was not to call attention to herself by any more stupid blunders. Things were bad enough.

Kaili lingered at the cafe until her tea was gone and the waitress began hinting that she was taking up needed space. Then she left to wander around the city. For quite a while the walking was all that kept her from breaking down in panic. After a bit, she felt calm enough to consider her next move.

I guess I should reserve a seat on that starliner to Mos Eisley, and find a temporary job to tide me over until it leaves. She had only 50 credits over the price to get home, all that she and Brett had been able to scrape up. Puzzling over the problem of finding a job in a city where she was a stranger, she realized she had no references, no computer record, nothing that an employer usually required before hiring. Oh, well, I'm a decent mechanic. With luck, I'll get something.

She snapped out of her reverie and realized that she'd wandered into what looked like a less-than-reputable area of Secten. The streets were narrow and dirty, and most of the buildings looked neglected. There seemed to be several cantinas in the immediate vicinity, with loud music and even louder talking coming through the open doorways. Jarelt's days were short and it would soon be dusk. I'd better get out of here. This place looks just like the parts of Mos Eisley Papa always told me to stay away from.

But she reminded herself Brett had frequented the saloons of Mos Eisley to pick up useful information from smugglers' gossip, and had passed it along the Alliance intelligence network. Maybe, if she went into one of these cantinas, she'd overhear something that would lead her to the Alliance outpost here in Secten. There had to be one: the rebel freighter had stopped here. Exactly where it was, she hadn't been told; the crew of the Alderaani ship had been cool and uncommunicative. But she knew all the code words. Once she picked up a lead, she'd try to gain their confidence, and then

maybe they'd help her.

She looked up and down the street, trying to decide which bar looked least threatening, and spied a food vendor about a block away. She hadn't eaten anything all day; now her stomach reminded her of that fact with a loud growl. She moved toward the stand.

While Kaili was still half a block away, the elderly blackskinned woman who was working the stand looked up at her. Her brown deep eyes met Kaili's, and she smiled a welcome. Encouraged by the first friendly gesture she'd gotten from anyone since leaving Dantooine, Kaili returned the smile and guickened her pace.

Suddenly, two large shapes shot out of a tiny, intersecting alleyway, and lunged at her. She tried to scream, but a hard hand clamped down over her mouth. Other hands pinned her arms behind her, and dragged her into the dusky sidestreet. Kicking wildly, she wished she had paid more attention to the hand-to-hand combat classes she'd attended on Dantooine. Then terror froze every muscle in her body as the thugs stripped her of her backpack and utility belt.

"You sure this is the girl Lokel wants?" one of them said as he bound Kaili's wrists behind her.

His companion eyed her critically. "Lessee... human, short, pale hair and eyes, dressed in a mechanic's overall. Gotta be her."

The first man smirked. "Lokel's buyer'll be tickled right out of his green scaly skin. He's been wanting a blondie for a long time." He took out his blaster and made an adjustment, then pointed it at Kaili. Her muscles seemed to melt as the energy bolt hit her, but she was still semi-lucid. Dear Suns, I'm going to be a slave...or worse.

"I think you two should let the young lady go," said a new voice out of the darkness.

The newcomer, whom Kaili vaguely recognized as the food vendor she'd been approaching, bent down and touched her hand to the helpless girl's forehead, seemingly unconcerned by the kidnappers' threats. "You do not want to harm this girl. You will leave her to me," she said calmly. She helped Kaili to her feet. Kaili was amazed that she could stand at all; her legs felt like rubber.

The old woman was still talking to the kidnappers. Their blasters wavered and fell from their hands. "You will go now and forget what you came here to do."

Picking up the girl's belongings, the woman half-led, half-dragged Kaili from the alley. They stumbled down the street and into a rundown building directly behind the vending stand. There, Kaili sank down on a narrow bed that the woman indicated, and tried to focus her eyes on her benefactress, but all the events of that harrowing day finally caught up to her. She slumped back on the cot, unconscious.

On first regaining her senses, Kaili was certain that somehow she'd been transported home, to her father's farmstead and her own cozy, underground room. She lay with her eyes closed for several moments, savoring the familiar sensation...her mother's love? There was another sensation mixed up with the caring warmth, less familiar but not totally unknown. Kaili expected the feeling to crystalize into a perception of her father, but it was different...resembling the power and sagacity she'd felt the few times she'd been near General Kenobi: years before, when he'd brought Luke home as a baby; and again, only months back, when she and Brett had visited him in his desert home.

She opened her eyes at last, puzzled at Kenobi's presense, since her father disliked the old Jedi. But she wasn't home at all. Instead, she was in a small, dimly-lit room, with a door and window facing the narrow street. The furnishings looked somewhat shabby, but clean, neat, and comfortable.

As the memory of her miserable day in Secten returned to Kaili, a shadowy figure emerged from a small alcove opposite the door, and drew a shade over the window. This done, the woman turned to smile at her guest. "Well, I see you must be feeling all right. If those hoods had really hurt you, you'd still be unconscious."

Groggily, Kaili raised herself on her elbows to look at her rescuer, who was drawing a chair up close to the cot. "I'm really grateful to you for helping me, though I'm not quite sure how you managed it. How long have I been out?"

"Only a half hour or so. Lie down and rest, dear, and tell me, what is your name?"

Kaili settled back, fixing her gaze on her hostess' face. She hesitated to identify herself; Brett had told her not to do so unless absolutely necessary. But instinctively she felt she could trust this person, who continued to radiate a soothing combination of caring and wisdom. "I'm Kaili Karaga, originally from Tatooine. Who are you?"

"My name is Dorit Suhal. My birthworld is Ladaan, although I've been here on Jarelt for many years."

Kaili knew nothing of Ladaan, but somehow the sound of the woman's name made her feel good. She contemplated that a few seconds, then smiled. "Your name's like my older sister's -- Dori."

Dorit's mouth curved in gentle amusement. "What brings a young girl like you to this slum, Kaili?"

Kaili sighed and closed her eyes. "It's a long story. And please don't think I mistrust you -- I don't -- but it's probably best that I don't tell."

"That's all right, child. All of us have secrets to keep."

Kaili wasn't sure why, but Dori's calm statement seemed significant. She lifted her head and stared hard at the woman, while various clues -- the quasi-Kenobi feeling, the way Dorit had subdued those thugs -- clicked into place in her mind. "You're a Jedi!" she said before she could think.

For the first time Dorit's placidity was shaken. She rose and walked away from Kaili, head bowed.

Kaili was mortified. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to blurt out your secret."

Dorit turned to look at her, then resumed her seat by Kaili's side, her composure regained. "It's no matter, I suppose," she said. "When I first caught sight of you on the street, I felt a fellowship in the Force...something I haven't perceived in anyone for a long time. It's one reason I interfered with the kidnapping."

It was Kaili's turn to be disconcerted. During the past eventful months she'd managed to push Kenobi's implication that she was Force-sensitive to the back of her mind. The notion both enticed and frightened her. Now, with Dorit's confirmation of her potential, the idea was back to stay, another addition to her already exhausting emotional burdens.

"Kaili Karaga, I think now that you \underline{do} owe me an explanation of your presence here." With a childlike grin, Dorit added, "I'll trust you if you trust me."

Kaili grinned back, and proceeded to trust Dorit with the knowledge of her involvement with the Alliance, cautioning the older woman that the rebel movement was secret and that she must keep the confidence. As Kaili talked, Dorit rose and moved about the kitchen alcove, preparing a meal of soup and salad, which Kaili accepted gratefully. Kaili continued to talk as she ate, sharing the reasons for her departure from the main Alliance base, and the breakup of her marriage. The older woman listened solemnly as Kaili concluded by describing this day's events, and her terror at being stranded so far from home.

There was a silence as the girl finished her meal. Kaili, waiting for Dorit's reactions, said sadly, "I guess you think it's wrong of me to leave my husband, and not carry through on the commitment I made. I don't blame you -- I'm not too happy with myself, either."

"It's not for me to judge you, Kaili."

"I...I'm glad you have that attitude. Everyone on the ship thought I was a deserter, and ignored me." She paused, then changed the subject. "Please tell me a little about yourself, Dorit. You're in hiding here?"

"Yes. No one on this planet knows I am Jedi. I've found that it's best to stay in humble surroundings, and work quietly at unobstrusive tasks, such as food vending. It's important, these days, not to call attention to one's higher abilities."

Kaili sensed the quiet sadness in Dorit's

voice. "I guess that's the way any surviving Jedi would act. I knew one on Tatooine, and everyone but my family thinks he's just an 'old desert rat'."

"What's his name?"

"Ben Kenobi."

Dorit looked astounded, then smiled. "So Obi-Wan survived the purges too. That's welcome news!"

"Did you know him?"

"Not well -- I never served with him. But all Jedi knew of him." $\,$

Kaili nodded, and said proudly, "My uncle was his student and friend. Did you ever hear of him? Luke Skywalker?"

Dorit's expression went blank for a moment, and she stared at Kaili. "Child, you continue to amaze me. Skywalker was your uncle? That's... interesting. Yes, I know of him."

"I barely remember him, myself. He was killed by a Jedi traitor during the Purge. His son lives with us."

"Skywalker left a son...." Dorit appeared to mull this over.

"But, Dorit, we were talking about you. What did you do as a Jedi? Were you a warrior, too?"

The woman laughed. "No, I wasn't a Jedi Knight. Like most people, you assume all Jedi were the enforcers of justice. I was a Jedi Counselor. Although we shared the basic training and abilities of the Knights, our primary talent was empathy. I specialized in helping people overcome problems of the mind."

Kaili's eyes widened. "Well, if the Force is still potent in the universe, maybe my finding you wasn't a coincidence."

"Perhaps not. But I sense that you are still in need of rest. We'll talk of this more tomorrow." Kaili nodded, and Dorit touched her forehead. Instantly the girl fell into slumber, feeling wrapped in a blanket of safety and love.

After a night punctuated with troubled dreams about Brett, Kaili was awakened by the morning sun shining in through the windows. She sat up and rubbed her eyes and found Dorit in the middle of preparations for her day's work at the vending stand. Dorit greeted her and asked how she'd slept.

"Not too well, I guess, but at least I don't feel exhausted anymore." She stood up and stretched, then looked around for her belt and pack.

"What are you doing?" Dorit asked as Kaili pulled the blaster which Brett had given her from her backpack and checked its charge. She holstered it about her waist.

Kaili turned to smile at her hostess. "You've been too kind, letting me stay the night. I can't impose on you any more. I'm going to find a hotel, and look for a job."

Dorit took her arm and made her sit down. "No, Kaili, I want you to stay here with me as long as you need to. It's no imposition. And I think you'd better stay out of sight a few more days, to make sure those slavers lose your track. Just because the two last night lost their memories doesn't mean you're safe."

"But I have my blaster, and I'll be more alert this time."

"I won't hear of it. A little discretion will keep you safer than a hundred blasters."

Kaili hesitated. "You're sure it's no trouble?"

"Of course, or I wouldn't offer."

The girl impulsively kissed Dorit's cheek. "Thanks. But from tonight on $\underline{I'll}$ sleep on the floor."

Dorit chuckled. "I won't say no to that. These old bones aren't used to bedrolls anymore."

As Dorit resumed her tasks, Kaili said, "Can I use your 'fresher? I'd like to shower."

"Right through there." Dorit pointed at a narrow doorway near the bed, which was hung with faded blue curtains.

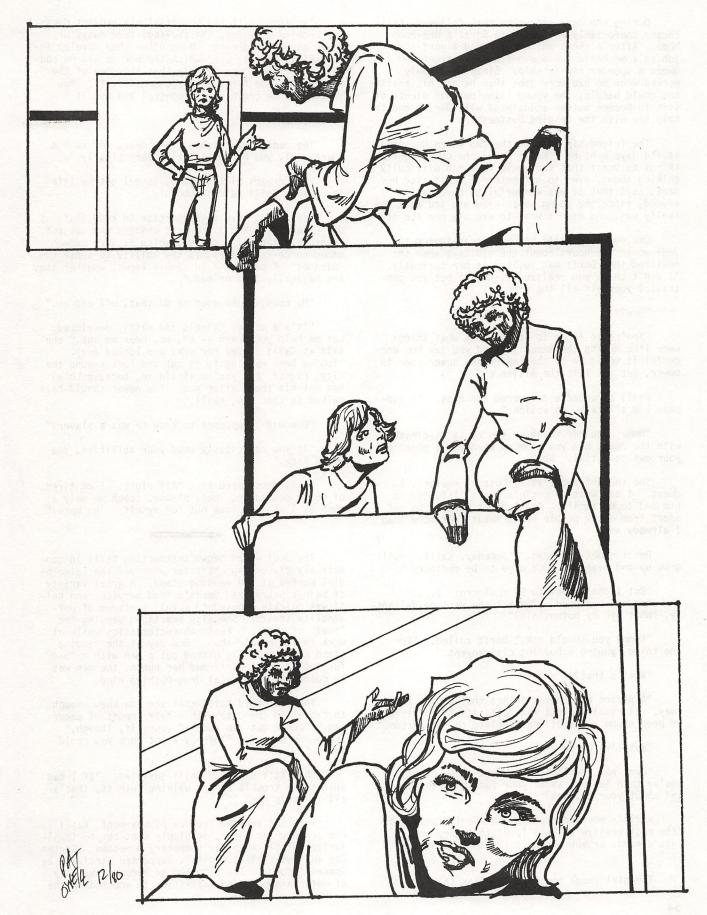
Kaili entered the cubicle and stripped, then looked about the shower stall for the sonics control. Unable to locate it, she poked her head through the curtains. "Where's your sonics switch?"

"I don't have sonics. Can't afford the equipment." Dorit noticed Kaili's shocked expression, and grinned. "Use the water instead. Here, I'll show you." She walked in, started the warm spray, and handed Kaili a bottle of liquid soap, a towel, and a soft brush. "Squeeze soap on the brush, work it into a lather, and...."

"I know, I know. But I don't <u>like</u> water showers."

"Well, you'll have to learn to like them,"
Dorit said in a teasing tone as she turned to leave.
"If you don't, you'll start smelling bad, and then
I will kick you out."

Kaili looked at the brush in her hand, at the water needles spraying from the nozzle. Resigning herself to the inevitable, she stepped into the stall. After the first shock of the water splashing on her bare skin, she decided it really wasn't too bad. She sniffed the soap. "Hmm. Smells nice." As she lathered up and scrubbed, she realized how childish she'd been to get into an argument with Brett over something that was actually quite pleasant.



During the days and weeks that followed, Kaili became comfortably ensconced in Dorit's one-room home. After a short while she found a part-time job as a mechanic for a man down the street who owned a speeder repair ship. Since Kaili only worked when he had more jobs than he and his assistant could handle, the young Tatooiner had plenty of time to become better acquainted with Dorit, and to help her with the vending business.

The friendship between the two women deepened as the days went by. Kaili found she could confide things to Dorit that she would have had difficulty talking about, even to her mother. Dorit, for her part, said that it was wonderful to have Kaili around, since the young woman knew who and what she really was, and didn't want to execute her for it.

One evening, Kaili had been questioning the Jedi woman for hours about the old days when she realized that Dorit was smiling at her curiously. "I don't think you realize it, Kaili, but you contradict yourself all the time."

"How?"

"You're so eager to learn about what things were like during the Republic, and you say how wonderful it would be if the Empire had never come to power, yet you left the Alliance."

Kaili shrugged and lowered her eyes. "I suppose I'm all talk, no action."

"Hmm. Another thing -- you're so fascinated with the Jedi, but you clam up whenever I point out your own potential. Why?"

She thought about it. "Lots of reasons, I guess. I saw what my uncle's way of life did to him and to my family. And I don't want to be set apart from other people -- at least, not more than I already am."

Dorit shook her head. "Someday, Kaili, you'll grow up and overcome your urge to be mediocre."

"But I $\underline{\text{don't}}$ want to be mediocre! I...." She stopped, $\underline{\text{confused}}$. "Okay," she went on defiantly, "what $\underline{\text{are}}$ my potentials?"

"Funny you should ask," Dorit smiled. "For one thing, you're a budding clairvoyant."

"What's that?"

"A person who senses things that happen far away. It usually first manifests itself in visions of people who are emotionally close to the person."

"But I've never --"

"Come now, Kaili. What about those dreams you've been having, about your family on Tatooine, and about your husband?"

Kaili's mouth dropped open. Dorit continued. "You must realize at some level that they aren't just dreams, or you wouldn't let them bother you so."

The girl shook her head to clear it.

"Sometimes, if the potential clairvoyant doesn't receive training, the feelings fade away, or
never go beyond dreams. More often they develop into waking visions, over which the person has no control. I'll tell you frankly that it's one of the
most burdensome forms of Force-sensitivity. You
should let me train you to control and use it."

"I can't."

The Jedi woman sighed. "My dear, for such a smart girl, you're not thinking very clearly."

"The dreams will go away, once I get my life in order," Kaili said stubbornly.

"You don't have the expertise to know that. I do." Kaili set her jaw; Dorit changed the subject. "Another potential you have, which is very common among Force-sensitives, is the ability to sense the 'mindset' of people -- in simple terms, whether they are basically good or bad."

"My cousin Luke used to do that, off and on."

"It's a useful talent, and easily developed. Let me help you learn -- no, no, hear me out," she said as Kaili folded her arms and looked away. "You've been wanting to go out and look around the city, right? But you're afraid to, because Lokel has set his thugs after you. You never should have talked to that man, Kaili."

"How was I supposed to know he was a slaver?"

"If you consciously used your abilities, you would know."

Kaili considered it. "All right. I \underline{am} tired of being cooped up. But, please, teach me only as much as I need to look out for myself -- no more."

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The Jedi woman began instructing Kaili in consciously discerning character whenever the Tatooine girl worked at the vending stand. A great variety of beings patronized Dorit's food service, and Kaili was quickly exposed to a full spectrum of personality traits. She also practiced sensing the "feel" of people's basic characteristics while at work in the repair shop. One day at the vending stand Kaili actually picked out a man with a "bad feeling". Dorit confirmed her hunch; the man was an operative of a local drug-pushing ring.

The Jedi told Kaili that she now knew enough to travel in the city with a fair amount of security. "Don't get too sure of yourself, though," the woman warned. "There's a lot more you could learn."

"No, it's enough," Kaili insisted. "If I can just sense trouble before walking into it, that's all I really need."

With her renewed freedom of movement, Kaili ran errands for Dorit, or simply went out to familiarize herself with her temporary hometown. Secten was an "intergalactic city", supported partially by Imperial funds. The city had an enormous variety of entertainments and facilities to accommodate the

myriad sapient species who visited there. Kaili learned to appreciate the free concerts in the parks, with music and dancing from many galactic cultures; restaurants with exotic foods; and huge libraries in which she could browse for hours.

On the other hand, she saw a great deal in Secten that upset her. The libraries were strictly censored; materials on certain political or historical subjects were unofficially restricted, and asking for them invited an interrogation by library security on suspicion of subversive activities. Poverty and hopelessness were widespread among the common people. Many of the citizens were regularly terrorized by the Stormtroopers, who seemed to do little to stop the serious crime that was so commonplace.

"Of course, it's tolerated," Dorit said one evening to a troubled Kaili after she had witnessed a slave sale in a nearby section of town.

"But it's $\underline{\text{illegal}}$. I know slavery's forbidden by the Empire."

"Dear child, you're such an innocent in some respects. The Imperials are paid to look the other way. A syndicate head bribes a top official, who passes the word down the line that the troopers should be blind to certain activities. I'm not saying such things didn't happen during the Republic's days, but it was much less widespread. It's rampant now. Money is power, fear is power. And the ruling class does all it can to ensure it wields plenty of both." Dorit paused, then added, "I'm sure it's one of the things your Alliance friends are hoping to change, if they succeed in overthrowing this regime."

"Can't you do something?"

Dorit bowed her head sadly. "My time is past, along with the rest of the Jedi. These events must run their course before a new hope rises." She smiled. "Each time must earn its own peace."

Kaili said nothing more, but thought about Dorit's words for days afterward. Owen and Beru -- and Brett -- had talked about the corruption in government, and she had seen it herself on a smaller scale in Mos Eisley. But its significance had never really made its impact on her mind. Now she was seeing it, firsthand and rampant, here in Secten, and she was beginning to regret that she'd left the one organization that was working to set things right.

"Kaili, are you going into town today?" Dorit said as the two women readied the vending stand for the day's business.

"I wasn't planning on it, unless you have something you want me to do for you." $\,$

"No, no. I just thought you'd be going to Port. Tomorrow's the fifteenth day of Panth. That's SD 10-238, you know."

Kaili looked at Dorit a bit sheepishly. "Uh, I know. But, well, if you don't mind, I think I'll stick around here 'til the next Tatooine flight."

The corners of Dorit's mouth curved up, but all she said was, "I don't mind a bit."

That night, Kaili woke in the darkness to find her face drenched with tears, and Dorit kneeling over her. The old woman shook her again. "Kaili, dear, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

The girl continued to weep as Dorit pulled her up to sit on the cot, and wrapped her arms about her. Kaili clung to the older woman, her sobs gradually calming as she felt Dorit's sympathy and concern.

""Now, dear heart, what did you see?" the woman asked at last.

Kaili wiped her face with the back of her hand. "I saw Brett -- with a woman I don't know. I've dreamed of him with Janna Vihn, but not this one. And, Dorit, this time I felt Brett's emotions so clearly. Not fuzzy, like before."

"Your talent is developing, whether you like it or not."

"I don't want it to! I felt like a voyeur. Dorit, how do I get rid of this? I can't stand it!"

Dorit hugged her more tightly as Kaili's voice rose hysterically. "Shh, calm down now. I can understand being upset because Brett's sleeping

"He wasn't, though. I couldn't blame him if he did, but so far he's pushed this new woman away. He slept with Janna once or twice, but it made him feel even worse, so he stopped."

"Do you know why?"

She considered it, and said slowly, "If I've sensed it correctly, it's because he's afraid of getting involved with any woman. He doesn't trust women anymore, doesn't want to risk being hurt again. And so he ends up hurting Janna, and this new woman. It's like a chain reaction." Tears dropped from her eyes. "I did the worst thing I could have done to him. I promised him I'd be his for a lifetime, then gave up after only three months. How could I be so cruel?"

Dorit rocked her back and forth, soothing her again. "Brett must deal with his own pain, as you must with yours. Sleep now, Kaili. We'll talk more about this in the morning."

"Did you dream a second time last night?" Dorit said as Kaili silently ate her breakfast.

"Yes. But I think it was a good dream. I saw my parents and Wynn and Luke moving my things out of my old room at home, and putting Wynn's belongings in. I...I couldn't see their faces too well. The whole dream was sort of misty."

"What do you think it means, Kaili?"

The young woman put down her spoon, and said pensively, "They're getting used to my being gone. They still miss me, I think, but the worst grief is going away."

"Yes. It's natural for children to leave home. It hurts when the child simply disappears, but the shock fades eventually. It's much worse when a mate in a monogamous union leaves, though. That's not natural, and very difficult to recover from."

"I know," Kaili whispered. She saw the dream image of Brett's tortured face in her mind, felt a strong echo of heartache in herself. "I know."

"Stupid, idiotic, $\underline{\text{dumb}}$! I can't believe I've been such an ass!"

Dorit looked up from her accounts as Kaili entered and stormed about the room. "Shh, quiet down. Why this sudden attack of self-disgust?"

"Now I really know what an immature fool I was to leave the Alliance and my husband." Kaili pointed a finger at her Jedi friend. "You're supposed to be such a great head-shrink, Dorit," she said with mock ire. "Why didn't you tell me what a selfish nitwit I am?"

Dorit smiled indulgently. "A good Counselor always lets her patient figure out such things for herself. What brought on this great revelation?"

Kaili sat down across from Dorit. "It's actually been growing on me for some time. But today it hit me hard." She paused. "I was attacked by a slaver again."

Dorit frowned. "You're not hurt?"

"No, thanks to you. I sensed him behind just before he jumped me, and I managed to stun him." She smiled in triumph for a second, then her face grew grim. "There must be a good market for fair-haired human slaves. It made me think: What if I hadn't had your training? What if you hadn't been around last time? There's no protection from the authorities, none at all. They couldn't care less that thousands of innocent citizens are being kid-napped and sold to who-knows-where every year." She sat back, thoughtful, then sighed. "Dorit, I want to go back to the Alliance. But I haven't the faintest notion how to contact them. Any ideas?"

"Oh, I suppose I can think of something," Dorit said casually. "I've been feeding information to the Alliance network for quite a while."

Kaili stared at her, stunned. "Since before I came?" $\,$

"Long before."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Dorit picked up her stylus and wrote more figures in her book. "If I had, you might have thought I was trying to influence you," she said, keeping her eyes downcast. "The possibility would have scared you away."

Kaili's gaze grew sympathetic. Until now, she hadn't fully realized how lonely Dorit must have been, hiding from Imperials and bounty-hunters in this hovel. The young woman was glad she'd been able to assuage some of that loneliness.

"Does the Alliance know you're a Jedi?"

"No. All they know is that I hear an awful lot of interesting gossip during the course of the business day. I have a contact who is supposed to come by the stand tomorrow. I'll tell her you want back in."

"They know who I am, then?"

"Oh, certainly. If you hadn't happened to fall in with me, they would have kept tabs on you some other way. Even if you'd gone to Tatooine, you'd have been watched there."

Kaili frowned. "They don't trust me to keep my knowledge secret?" $\label{eq:condition}$

"They have to be careful. Surely you understand that."

"Well, please put in a good word for me with your contact."

"The best word I can," Dorit reassured her.

Kaili and Dorit had a guest for dinner a few days later. Dona Rwandl, a golden-skinned human from the planet Cairn, was Dorit's Alliance contact, and had come to gauge Kaili's change of heart.

Dona was not much older than Kaili's eighteen standard years, and only a little taller. She had straight, red hair, and emerald-hued eyes. The rebel girl was friendly toward Kaili, but still put her through a merciless verbal grilling while Dorit bustled about with dinner preparations.

"Do I pass?" Kaili said anxiously as the three women sat down to their meal.

"Well, I think you've got what it takes. This is only preliminary, though. I'll send your request on the next ship that passes through here on the way to...." Dona paused as though waiting for Kaili to supply the planet's name.

Kaili grinned. "I'm onto to you, Dona. I won't fall for that trick."

Dona smiled back. "If you'd named where the base is, I'd have disqualified you immediately."

"You don't know where it is, do you?"

"No, it's not necessary. But I'm asking for an assignment to the main base, since I think I'd be more useful there. My request'll go out the same time as yours."

Dorit spoke up. "I've known you for a while now, Dona, but I don't know much about you. What's your line of work?"

"I'm attending the Secten School of Broadcasting, studying media journalism. But I'm not going to stick around long enough to get my diploma and let the Empire draft me for their propaganda operation. I was going to drop out of sight before graduation and work in communications and propaganda for the Alliance. Now I want to move the agenda up."

Kaili nodded. "I should have known you're a professional word-slinger. I felt like my brain was being picked clean during that 'interview'."

"That's m'job."

The next two standard months were the happiest part of Kaili's stay on Jarelt. Having made her decision to return to the Alliance, she found a peace of mind she hadn't known since leaving Tatooine. The uncertainty about whether the Alliance leaders would allow her to return gnawed at her, but she didn't allow it to overwhelm her. The only real problem was her continuing clairvoyant dreams of Brett's deep emotional suffering. Her responsibility for so severely hurting him weighed on her conscience. She hoped that he'd let her try to make it up to him, but knew she'd not be able to fault him if he couldn't bring himself to trust her.

She enjoyed her budding friendship with Dona Rwandl immensely. Having lived a life of isolation on Tatooine, she'd never had an opportunity to develop a friendship with a girl her own age. Even her two sisters, older than she, had been married by the time Kaili had reached her teens. Now, as she'd learned empathy for troubled people from Dorit, she was learning to be a worthwhile friend from Dona.

The two girls explored Secten together more thoroughly than Kaili could have done alone. Dona introduced Kaili to the joys of shopping for clothing, having grown weary of seeing her friend wear the same kind of coveralls every day. The two girls even persuaded Dorit to close her business now and then, and join them. Then they would enjoy carnivals, picnics, and many other activities. It warmed Kaili's heart to see Dorit enjoy herself. The Jedi had permitted herself nothing but seclusion and work since the Purge, and Kaili was glad that the old woman could break out of her self-imposed prison at last.

"Dona said that an Alliance freighter will be arriving here this week," Kaili told Dorit one evening as they prepared dinner.

"Dona won't be going yet; she wants to wait until she's finished most of her studies before joining the main base. But I might, if the chiefsof-staff will let me."

"For your sake, I hope they do."

Kaili fell silent while she set the table.

Dorit laughed. "I think I'd better stay right where I am. What would they do with an old woman like me?"

"You could be a Counselor again, that's what. Wouldn't you rather do that? And we need you. You could show us how to use the Force to accomplish our goals."

"I'd like that, but I think the Alliance must take a more materialistic approach to developing its strength, at least at this stage. Later, well The Jedi failed them ten years ago; they're not ready to do more than use the concept of the Force as a unifying symbol for the rebellion."

"Well, \underline{I} need you. I'm beginning to think I should understand more about my 'seeing'. You said it takes a long time to learn, and I won't have time to get the training before I leave." Kaili reached across the table to clasp Dorit's hand in her own. "Most of all, I hate to leave you all by yourself again. I want to see you among people who know what you really are, and honor it. Wouldn't you like that?"

A nostalgic gleam lit Dorit's eyes. "It would be wonderful to have a real purpose in life again, and help people with my skills."

"Instead of letting them go to waste in these back alleys. You'll come, then?"

"I don't know. There are things I do -- or can do -- here, as well. Let me think it over." Dorit paused. "But, in case I decide not to go, I'd better start withdrawing the Support Bond."

"The what?"

The old woman chuckled. "You may have wondered what is special about a Jedi Counselor's aid. We use our empathic abilities to lend necessary emotional support, especially during crises."

Kaili suddenly remembered the warm, motherly sensation she'd felt her first night in Secten. She realized now that the perception had never faded, but had remained so constant that she'd become unconscious of it. "I'm not sure I understand. Did you dull my feelings?"

"Not at all. If your pain had been artificially reduced, you wouldn't have learned to overcome it. I simply supported you, kept you from feeling totally alone, so the trauma wouldn't overwhelm you."

"Yes," Kaili said thoughtfully. "I never felt things were hopeless after I came here."

"That's what the Support Bond is for. Now, though, I feel that you're emotionally healed enough to stand alone...which, of course, you must do to be truly well. The special empathy will fade gradually. But you're like a daughter to me, Kaili. That bond can never be cut."

"Oh, Dorit, I can never thank you enough,"
Kaili said, deeply touched. "If only there was
something I could do for you, too."

"Continue growing in unselfishness, and help others any way you can. Then my efforts will truly bear fruit."

Shortly after dawn of the day the Alliance ship was due, Kaili hurried through the streets of Secten toward Dona Rwandl's apartment. Excited and nervous, she couldn't wait to find out if she would be permitted to return to Dantooine. Halfway to her destination, her progress was abruptly halted by a familiar figure popping from the doorway of an abandoned warehouse. "Kaili! In here, quick!"

"What in the galaxy...." Kaili's voice trailed off as Dona shushed her and pulled her inside the old building, closing the door carefully behind them. Kaili stared at her friend in the dim light. Dona wore a dark scarf over her fiery hair; her bronze-toned face was haggard and tear-streaked. "For suns' sakes, what's the matter?"

"The Imperials are onto us, Kai. They burned our outpost this morning, and killed everyone in the catalogue-order ship that fronted it. Our computer tech managed to erase the comp's memory and get away. He used the comlink to warn me to try to make it to the *Rising Sun*. The ship got in early this morning."

"How did they discover the outpost?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"This is awful! Do you think the Imperials know about the $\underline{\mbox{whole}}$ Alliance?"

"I doubt it. If they thought we were more than a local resistance movement, they'd have taken prisoners for questioning, instead of just gunning everyone down." Dona tugged at Kaili's arm. "We've got to reach the ship. The Imps could be looking for us right this -- Kai, what's wrong?"

Kaili staggered back a few paces from her friend. The familiar sense of comfort and security was gone, snatched away, leaving her with a disoriented, hollow feeling. After a split-second of confusion, she realized what it meant. "The Support Bond!" she whispered.

"What?"

Kaili shook off Dona's arm and jerked the door open. "It's Dorit!" she called back as she started to run up the street the way she had come.

The Cairnese woman caught up to her and yanked her into an alleyway. "Kaili, we don't have time for goodbyes. Dorit'll figure things out, and understand."

"Something's happened to her!" Kaili sobbed, pulling her arm away. She ran out of the alley.

"How do you know?" Dona called after her. She ran to catch up with Kaili again, swearing in every

language she knew.

They rounded a corner and came upon a knot of beings gathered about Dorit's food stand, murmuring among themselves. Kaili and Dona shoved their way through, and looked around in bewilderment. "Where's Dorit?" Kaili said. Simultaneously, Dona asked, "What happened?"

One of the people in the crowd touched Kaili's shoulder. She turned and recognized Tare Wek, the owner of the repair shop. "Stormtroopers came," he said softly. "She saw them and ran into her house; and they followed and ransacked her room. But they didn't take her away. I don't know what happened to her."

Kaili frowned and pushed through the crowd into the hovel, calling Dorit's name. She looked in every possible hiding place, but could find no sign of her friend. The only way out was through the front door, and if the troopers had cut off that escape.... Mystified, she rejoined the group outside.

"Kaili," Wek said to her, "if those whiteshells were after Dorit, they could be looking for you, too."

Dona had been talking to one of the smugglers in the crowd. As Wek finished speaking, she whispered in Kaili's ear, "M'kil told me the Imps shot two bartenders on this street. They were informants in my network. Wek is right, we'd better scram."

"But Dorit's in danger!"

Kaili blinked back tears. She hated to leave without knowing whether her Jedi friend was alive or dead, but she saw the sense in Dona's words, and nodded reluctantly.

The Cairnese woman led her friend away. Suddenly the danger signal Dorit had taught Kaili to heed began ringing in her mind. "Not this way," she gasped, freezing in her tracks.

"This is the quickest way to the port!"

Kaili ran back toward Dorit's vending stand. "They're coming back!"

"How do you know these things?" Dona demanded. Kaili didn't answer. She pushed Dona to cover behind the stand and jerked her blaster from its holster, as the first Stormtroopers rounded the corner.

Dona ceased her questions and drew her weapon. Their first shots felled four Imperial soldiers, and was the signal for every being in the street, space smuggler and planetbound laborer alike, to avenge the dead 'tenders by joining in the Stormtrooper shoot.

The soliders fell back. What they'd expected to be an easy elimination of a suspected subversive became a one-sided massacre. Dona saw an opportunity to get away while the troopers were retreating.



She scurried over to Kaili. "Come on, this is our chance."

Kaili didn't respond, but in her anger and grief, continued to pick off trooper after trooper.

"Kaili, you idiot!" Dona said, exasperated. "Let's go!" $\,$

Finally Kaili nodded and lowered her blaster. While Dorit's neighbors continued to blast the Imperials, they turned and raced down an alley, on a circuitous route to Secten Port.

They had almost reached the gigantic terminal when Dona halted and grabbed Kaili. "What's wrong?" Kaili said.

"We can't go that way -- the Imperials probably have troopers at all the terminal entrances by now. And there's probably a general alert out on us as well."

"So what do we do?"

Dona kept silent, thinking. Finally she said, "The *Rising Sun*'s docked right near the outer wall. We'll have to climb over."

"But we'll set off alarms."

"I know, but with luck, we'll be in the ship before the Stormtroopers can get there." Kaili's doubt must have shown on her face. "Well, have you got any brighter ideas?"

"No."

"Come on, then. If it doesn't work, we've bought it anyway." $% \begin{center} \end{center} \begin{center} \be$

They picked their way through the slums around the bay complex, until Dona stopped at what she said was their destination. They waited until the alleyway alongside the high stone wall was deserted. Then, with adrenalin-charged strength, Kaili boosted her friend to the top of the wall.

Alarms started screaming in the distance as Kaili backed up and made a flying leap at the wall. Dona barely caught her hand, but grasped it firmly as Kaili clawed her way to the top. They tumbled together down the other side. There wasn't time to worry about catching their breath. They picked themselves up and dashed toward the *Rising Sun*.

It seemed to be forever until Dona, ahead of Kaili, ducked into the bay housing the Alderaani ship. It was similar to the one which had brought Kaili to Jarelt. They scrambed up the gangplank, and a young, dark-haired man hit the controls that closed the hatch. "We made it, Hoyt," she wheezed. "Anyone else supposed to come?"

"No," Hoyt said, eyeing Kaili. "You and I are the only survivors. Who's she?"

"Kaili Karaga. I've told you about her."

"Right." He motioned the women toward the acceleration couches, then ran for the cockpit entry. "Captain Merin, we'd better take off! Everyone's

here who's gonna be." Then he took a seat next to Dona .

Kaili grinned at the other woman as they collapsed, puffing, into the deeply-padded chairs, and strapped themselves in. "Seems like every time I leave a planet, it's by the skin of my teeth," Kaili said between gasps remembering her getaway from Tatooine with Brett.

The ship took off amid the howling of alarms and the blaster fire of the Stormtroopers who had tracked Kaili and Dona to the *Rising Sun*. The Imperials didn't seem to be organized enough to give them much of a space chase, however; the *Sun* left Jarelt's gravity field and jumped into hyperspace without serious pursuit,

Captain Merin joined them in the cabin. A medium-height, auburn-haired woman, she looked uncannily familiar to Kaili. "Whew!" she said, pulling her gloves off. "That's one planet I won't be going back to without a new registration." She nodded a greeting to Dona, then looked at Kaili suspiciously. "Who's she?"

"This is Kaili Karaga," Dona replied. "I hadn't gotten the official okay to bring her yet, but the Imperials would have fried us if --"

Merin rose from her seat. "You!" she spat. "The chiefs-of-staff said under no conditions were you to come back to the base. They'll have my head if --"

Suddenly Kaili knew where she had seen this woman before: in her dreams, with Brett. "I think you're mistaken, Captain Merin," she said smugly. "They haven't made a decision yet one way or another. But you would prefer to keep me away until my divorce is legal...wouldn't you?"

Merin froze, astounded. Without another word, she whirled and stomped back to the cockpit.

Dona and Hoyt exchanged shocked, troubled looks. Then the Cairnese woman took Kaili's arm and led her toward a passageway. "Let's get cleaned up."

Kaili entered one cabin and stripped off her grimy, torn clothes. After a sonic shower, Dona came in with a medikit, and the two treated each other's cuts and scrapes.

"Kaili, I want straight answers to a few questions," Dona said after a long silence.

"I could use a nap. Maybe later, all right?"

"No. Now, Kai." Dona fixed her gaze on her friend. "How did you know about Dorit, and the Stormtroopers, and...and Captain Merin?"

Kaili sighed. Dorit was...gone...and they were on their way to the relative security of Dantooine. It couldn't hurt for Dona to know, now. "Dorit was a Jedi. And I...I could have been one too, once upon a time."

Dona's eyes widened, but then she nodded. "That explains a lot -- not only about what you did



today, but about Dorit. I wondered about her; she always seemed a cut above the usual street vendors. But she'd never talk about her past."

After a few minutes, Dona continued, "Dorit was my best intelligence source. She always had totally accurate information that no one else had. One thing she said to me, though, I didn't report. It seemed so -- so strange." Dona engaged the total recall she'd learned at school. "'Appearances are not the reality, Dona. There is a force more deadly than Imperial troops behind the Empire's ascendency, although few realize it yet. When the dark power that actually holds the reins of Imperial sovereignty reveals itself, more than military might will be needed to conquer it.'"

Kaili nodded; she recalled similar comments Dorit had made to her. "We'd better be sure to report that, now, to the Alliance leaders."

"What did Dorit teach you, Kaili?"

"Not much." Reluctantly, she admitted, "I wouldn't let her. I learned a little about sensing danger. And I can 'see' things that are happening far away, sometimes, when I dream. That's how I knew about Captain Merin and my husband." She forced down a lump in her throat. "I was afraid of learning more, although I wasn't sure why. Now I do know, and I'm glad that Dorit never taught me more. If I learned about the Force, I might use it against people, like I did today with Captain Merin." She sighed. "The temptation to misuse power can be irresistible."

Dona frowned, but made an attempt at levity. "Well, using the Force almost got you spaced, to-day."

"Spaced?"

"Sure. Captain Merin was so mad, she probably had a hard time keeping herself from shoving you out the airlock."

Kaili had to grin.

Dona stood up and finished closing her torn jumpsuit. "Let me go see if she wants to be nice, instead, and lend us both some decent clothes."

"Kaili, you didn't tell me it was so humid here," Dona said as the two women disembarked from the *Rising Sun*.

"Hmm?" Kaili was too busy looking around the hangar cavern for Brett to pay her friend much heed.

"You know -- hot, sticky. It's like a sauna."
Dona wiped her brow with her sleeve.

"Oh. Well, you didn't ask." Dona groaned, and Kaili smiled at her. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. And this time, so will I."

Suddenly someone gave Kaili an exuberant slap on the back, nearly bowling her over. She whirled to find Gerel Merd next to her, a wide, welcoming grin on his face. "Kai! It's really you! You've

come back!"

"No, I'm just a ghost," she said, laughing. Impulsively she hugged him, overjoyed at seeing a familiar face again.

Gerel was astonished, but returned her embrace. He said, "Does Brett know you're back?"

Sobering, Kaili said, "I don't know. Do you know where he is?"

The young man shook his head, beginning to eye Dona curiously. Remembering her manners, Kaili introduced them. After the three exchanged small talk a few minutes, Dona said, "Maybe we'd better try to see a commander now. We're both here unexpectedly, they'll have to figure out where to assign us."

Correctly interpreting this to mean, "We'd better find out if they'll let you stay," Kaili followed Dona as she looked for a deck officer. Her initial joy wavered at the reminder of her uncertain status.

Before long, Kaili was ushered into Dr. Rekar's office, where the psychologist and one of General Dodonna's aides, Commander Lete, were waiting. The commander listened closely as Rekar questioned Kaili. Then they withdrew into an adjoining room to confer, leaving Kaili to twist her hands in her lap nervously. When they rejoined her, Kaili knew immediately from Dr. Rekar's broad smile that they had decided to let her stay.

"We're glad to have you back, Kaili," the psychologist said. "You're to report to your former station tomorrow at the regular time."

She breathed a great sigh of relief. "Thank you, sir," she said, getting up. "May I go now?"

"Yes, of course," the doctor said.

As Kaili turned to leave, Lete spoke up. "One thing, Technician Karaga...."

"Yes, sir?"

"We can't have our members bouncing in and out like rubber balls. Should you decide to get homesick again, I'm afraid you'll be escorted back to Tatooine, minus some memories."

Kaili gulped. "I understand, Commander. I assure you, I have no desire to leave the Alliance again." $\label{eq:control}$

"As I said, Lete, Ms. Karaga will be fine," Rekar said. "Now, Kaili, please ask Communicator Rwandl to step in."

Kaili nodded and beat a hasty retreat. She found Dona in the corridor -- talking to Brett.

For a moment Kaili froze, then walked up to her husband and held out her hand. "How are you, Brett?" she said simply.

"I'm well." He took her hand in both of his and gazed at her for a moment. Then he released her and said, "I've been getting to know your

friend."

Dona had been edging away, apparently not wanting to interfere with their reunion. She stopped as Kaili turned to smile at her. "I'm glad you two met," Kaili said. "Dona, don't go away. Dr. Rekar wants to see you now. I'll meet you later for dinner."

"Okay -- see you in the dining hall."

Brett and Kaili were left alone, each groping for something to say. An uneasy silence fell as they stared at each other. At last Kaili said, "Would you like to hear about what's been happening to me the last few months?"

"Very much. I'd especially be interested in why you and Dona are all scratched up and bruised." He reached out gently and tilted her head to observe the half-healed cuts more closely.

"We had to climb a high wall to get away from Stormtroopers, and lost our balance."

"You were in a fight with Stormtroopers?"

"We had trouble getting off of Jarelt. Dona and I must have picked off half a squad between us. And when the smugglers joined in --"

"You killed Stormtroopers?"

Kaili tried not to let herself smile at Brett's amazement. "It was either them or me."

Brett could only blink. Then he said, "How about telling it from the beginning."

As they walked slowly to Brett's cabin, she described what she had been doing since leaving Dantooine, and summarized the events during her last day on Jarelt. He sank down on the floor padding, and was deep in thought when she finished her narrative. Feeling shy, she didn't sit next to him. Instead, she seated herself on one of the cabin's two chairs.

As the silence between them continued, she began to fidget and cast about mentally for anything to say. "Brett, you wouldn't happen to still have some of my shorts sets, would you? I'm hot in this tunic getup."

"Everything you left behind is in the storage chest." $\,$

Kaili retrieved her shorts sets from the nearby trunk, and said casually, "I'll have to find Captain Merin and return her clothes."

Brett started at the mention of Merin's name, and Kaili tried to pretend she didn't notice his scrutiny. Finally, Brett said, "Kai...what now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've rejoined the Alliance. Do you want to go back to the way we were, too?"

"No, Brett. I'm hoping we can have a $\underline{\text{better}}$ relationship than that, if you want it. I'm not

the neurotic I was before."

Brett signed and shook his head. "I don't know, Kai. It's not that easy, I think. You can't imagine what I've been going through since you left -- the heartache, the self-doubt..."

Kaili held back from assuring him that she <u>did</u> know, first hand. She hadn't told him everything about Dorit, and had said nothing about the clair-voyant dreams, figuring it was best not to complicate matters.

"I said I was hoping, Brett. I wouldn't be human if I didn't. But I didn't say I <u>expected</u> you to take me back. There's no real reason for you to trust me." Brett's brow furrowed, and she knew he hadn't expected her to take that attitude. She continued softly, "I won't hold you prisoner, just as you didn't hold me."

They stared at each other until Kaili's gaze wavered and she turned away to gather up her belongings, trying to hold back tears. Her voice was trembling slightly as she said, "I'll move in with Dona for the time being. Let me know what you decide." She started for the door.

"Kaili!"

"Yes?"

Kaili smiled at him as best she could. "Of course not. The Alliance is my life -- for real this time."

*

"Kaili, want to go swimming with Gerel and me?" Dona said after duty one evening, several weeks later.

"Swimming? Tonight?" Kaili blanched. Although she'd finally adjusted to Dantooine's climate during the month she'd been back, and had participated in many of the base's leisure activities, she still hadn't gone near the ocean.

"Sure, why not?" Gerel said. "The sun won't set for at least two hours."

"Well, all right. I guess it's about time I used the swimsuit Brett bought me."

A few minutes later she joined Dona and Gerel on the beach, attired in the skimpy garment and carrying a towel. Gerel's eyes gleamed as he regarded her. "It's about time, Kai! How much do you want to bet you'll like it?"

"I don't gamble, Ger," she laughed, walking cautiously into the shallow water near the shore. "I've been proven wrong too often lately to risk the few credits I've got."

Soon her two friends coaxed her to venture out farther, until the water was waist-high on her. While they swam and splashed about, Kaili stood still, waiting for the last of her fears to

evaporate. Even though she'd learned to appreciate water baths and showers, it was still strange to be surrounded by so <u>much</u> water. Gerel assured her that it had been equally strange to him, the first time he'd tried it, so she didn't worry that her old paranoia was returning.

Soon she began to feel more exhilarated than intimidated by the joyful energy of the turbulent water that stretched into seeming infinity. She tried going a little deeper, and jumped up and down in time with the waves, losing her footing now and then but not allowing herself to panic when the water covered her head.

"You're doing fine," Dona said, swimming over to her. "Just hold your breath and close your eyes when you go under."

"I know," Kaili said, choking a bit. "I didn't do it fast enough, that's all."

Gerel joined them. "Ready for a swimming lesson?" $\ensuremath{\mbox{\sc derivation}}$

"I think I'd better -- or I'm going to drown just standing here!"

After a few tries, Kaili was floating on her back. She was about to attempt a basic swimming stroke, when suddenly she was pulled under by an unknown assailant. She came up sputtering to discover the culprit was Brett.

"Never could resist dunking a pretty girl," he said, grinning at her. $\,$

"Good of you to sneak up, Brett," Dona laughed. "We looked for you, but you weren't around, or we would have asked you to join us."

"I had some work to finish. But when Jake told me Kaili was actually learning to swim, I had to see for myself. You finally pulled her off that boulder, eh, Gerel?"

"Nah. All Dona and I did was ask her. No physical prodding necessary."

Brett smiled at Kaili. "Come on," he said. "I'll take over as your swimming instructor."

Dona and Gerel took the hint and swam away. Kaili said, "I'm a little tired now, Brett. I'm not used to this yet. Could we get out and sit on the sand a few minutes?"

"Suits me. I came down here to talk to you."

I thought so, Kaili said to herself as they made their way to the beach. She sensed that he'd reached a decision. Although he seemed cheerful at the moment, she was afraid to hope that he would want her back.

They sat down together on the wet sand, and enjoyed the warmth of the evening sun in companionable silence. "It's a pretty sunset, even with only one sun," Kaili commented, gazing at the dramatic streaks of pink, gold and green on the western horizon. "I've never seen anything quite

like it at home."

"Home," Brett repeated. "Kai, it's never been clear to me how you got over being homesick. Did Dorit have something to do with it?"

"I suppose so," Kaili said. She had already explained to Brett about Dorit and the clairvoyant dreams during private talks they'd had throughout the weeks since she'd returned from Jarelt. Kaili had decided that it was best to be honest with him, and let him know that Force-related problems might happen to her in the future. If he wasn't willing to deal with that, he could let their divorce go into effect.

After a pause, Kaili continued, "I doubt if I'll ever comprehend everything she did for me. Mostly, though, I realized that my folks <u>did</u> adjust to my disappearance, just as you said they would. I should have listened to you. When I saw them at peace in my dreams, I knew I was free to return to Dantooine."

"Your 'dreams' are something else I want to know more about. Are you still having them?"

"I haven't been bothered by those kind of dreams at all since I've been back. But Dorit said that they can become a problem without training. And now there's no one to train me." She sighed. "By the time I realized Dorit was right, it was too late."

"Yes, you can be stubborn," Brett said.

Kaili laughed and agreed.

After another short silence, Brett said, "Kai, I've got something important to tell you."

"Yes?"

"General Dodonna has decided to send me and a couple of other engineers off-planet for six months, kind of 'undercover', to a university on Corell. We'll be studying techniques for integrating artificial intelligence with spacecraft systems. It's a whole new field opening up, and we have to keep on top of technical developments."

The news was like a physical blow to Kaili, and she kept her eyes lowered. So much for salvaging our marriage, she thought dejectedly. She felt his keen gaze, and managed to say, "I'm sure it's a good idea. The more training you get, the better it'll be for the rebellion."

"Yes, it will," he said. "The commanders also want to send you to Corell for some formal basic training, along with Gerel and a few other promising mechanics." As she looked up at him in surprise, he added with a grin, "Janna's been doing her best, but even though she's a great engineer, she's a lousy teacher."

"Yeah, she sure is," Kaili agreed fervently. Affecting nonchalance, she traced doodles in the sand with her finger. Brett, for suns' sakes, get to the point!

"And I was thinking...it's going to cost the Alderaani government a lot to pay our tuition and living expenses. It'd be cheaper if you and I shared an apartment."

"That's a...practical idea," she said, turning away to hide a smile. She could $\underline{\text{feel}}$ what he wanted to say.

"What I'm trying to ask is --"

She laughed and threw her arms about him. "I know! Oh, Brett, stop being so blasted solemn!"

He returned her embrace and kissed her. It was a wonderful moment. Then Brett drew back, and spoke, his voice serious again. "I'm glad you're happy, Kai, and so am I, but we both have to realize that it won't be happily ever after. We'll still have problems; we have to work our way back to full trust. It won't be easy."

Kaili gazed at him thoughtfully. Ever since using her limited abilities with the Force against Captain Merin, she'd avoided using them deliberately. But now, imitating what she understood of Dorit's techniques, she opened herself to Brett empathically. She sensed, hazily, his continuing feelings of self-doubt, and his reluctance to risk being hurt again struggling against the love he still felt for her.

"The risk will be worth it, Brett," she said gently. "Love can win out, if we only try."

Brett nodded, and his expression softened.
"I've been watching you this past month. I think you've found yourself again. You're that wonderful person I fell in love with on Tatooine. Maybe my

judgment wasn't so bad after all!"

"You always did have good instincts," she grinned.

"Maybe so, but I'd better warn you. It'll be winter on the part of Corell we're going to.
Another new climate, Kai."

"I'll get used to it. And I'm curious to see what snow's like."

"Being a student at a university isn't all that easy. Lots of studying. It's been a while since you've been in school."

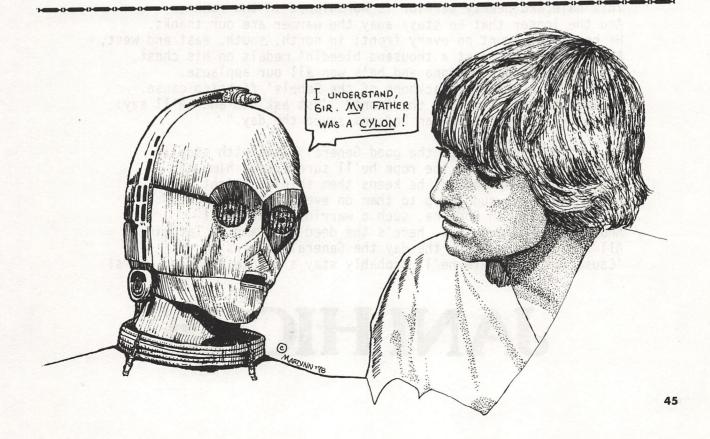
"I'll concentrate and do well. The Alliance won't waste its money." $\hfill \hfill \h$

"Plus we'll be trying to put our marriage back together. I just want you to realize all the pressures."

"You're really not afraid?"

"No more than I ought to be. I'm looking forward to seeing more of the galaxy with you. After all, that's one of the reasons I joined the Alliance in the first place. Remember?"

"Yeah," he said, finally starting to smile. "I also remember what you told me about the two sides of your family, way back when. It looks as if your mother was right." Brett gathered her close to him. "Kaili, you're a Skywalker after all!"



Rebels' Lament

(to "General Guinness")

You've heard of General Willard and of good Lin Walthar, too, But there's an Alderaani I must mention unto you. He came from that fair planet close to every Rebel heart, And compared to those he generals he's a man a world apart. He's good old Jan Dodonna; he's a soldier old and stout. He's convinced himself that somehow he just can't be done without. His noble name will never fail to draw Corellian cheers; He's good old Jan Dodonna with his Rebel cavaliers.

This hale and hearty warrior is worshipped in the ranks,
And the longer that he stays away the warmer are our thanks.
He bears the brunt on every front; in north, south, east and west,
And he's got at least a thousand bleedin' medals on his chest.
He's good old Jan Dodonna and he's won all our applause.
He says he's been the backbone of the Rebels' fighting cause.
Who was the first out at the front? Just ask him and he'll say:
"In every Rebel battle Jan Dodonna saved the day."

Each of our engagements the good General plans with stealth. We figure if he's got the rope he'll surely hang himself.

And all his many medals, he keeps them shining bright,

And he loves to cuddle up to them on every moonlit night.

He's good old Jan Dodonna, such a warrior never seen!

And if you b'lieve that, here's the deed to swamp on Tatooine!

All Rebels live to rue the day the General appears

'Cause now he's here he'll probably stay a couple thousand years!

JANI HICKS

EVILLA MAY STRIKES BACK AGAIN

from the further adventures of Evilla May Vader

Sandy Hall

"YOU DID WHAT?!?"

"I, uh, <u>Fritz</u> and I destroyed Luke Skywalker," Evilla May repeated nervously. She was beginning to think she'd done something wrong.

Twelve-foot flames erupted from the figure at the other end of the room. The wind began to howl and there was a tinkling sound as the window glass shattered into millions of tiny pieces. C-4UR, Evilla May's droid, tried to disappear through the wall. His mistress definitely had done something wrong.

"It was all Fritz's idea," Evilla May lied hurriedly. " \underline{I} thought we were just out riding around and then he --"

"Shut up!" the blazing figure roared. "Of all the stupid things to do! You get him back! Do you hear me?"

"But I don't know how!" stammered Evilla May.

The earth began to rumble. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed.

"I'm too young to die!" cried C-4UR. " $\underline{\text{Do}}$ something, Evilla May!"

"I'll find a way!" the girl promised fervently.

"You'd better," the figure warned. "And fast!"
"I will!"

The flames died down and Evilla May began to breathe again.

Then the figure said, "Just wait 'til your father gets home!"

monomore

The *Epoch Vulture* raced through hyperspace, her engines straining to produce the asked-for speed.

"Can't we go any faster?" C-4UR burst out.

"Shut up," Evilla May said grimly. "We passed the safety limit speeds ago."

"Someone better tell me what's going on," warned Fritz Cher, "or someone is going to be sorry."

"In a minute, Fritz. Watch that gauge, C-4UR."

"I'm watching, I'm watching!"

"No, you're not, you're --"

"Evilla May...."

"Don't interrupt me when I'm piloting, Fritz."

"All right, nobody move!" Fritz commanded. C-4UR and Evilla May looked up in surprise. Fritz had his blaster pointed at them. "I've had enough!" he declared. "You two show up at the Dark Lord College, drag me out of kill class, and tell me we're going on a trip we should have left on yesterday. What is going on?"

Evilla May sighed. "All right, I knew I'd have to explain sooner or later."

"Sooner," said Fritz.

"Okay, put your blaster away and we'll go back to the lounge. 4UR, call me when we get there."

"Get where?!" shouted Fritz.

"Come on and I'll tell you," Evilla May answered

Fritz eagerly followed his friend to the ship's lounge. He sat down but Evilla May seemed worried. She paced the deck as she talked.

"Well, you know I went to see Daddy and Mother. I told them about our raid on the rebellion, and how we gave Han Solo a nervous breakdown by destroying his ship."

"I know," Fritz said impatiently. "Didn't he like it?"

"He liked that part," Evilla May admitted. "He said it was worthy of a Vader. Then he found out about Skywalker."

"I'll bet he really laughed then," Fritz snickered.

"Not exactly. It seems Daddy had his own plans for Skywalker. After they both calmed down a little we had a family discussion. Fritz, some of the things they told me... Well, they were just awful!"

"They can't be that bad."

"Oh, yeah? Listen to this. I'm only half Sith."

"Half? But --"

"Mother was a Jedi. Oh, she's legally a Sith, but it's not blood." $\,$

"Wow!" Fritz exclaimed.

"That's not all. Dear little Luke Skywalker is my dear little \underline{cousin} Luke Skywalker. Isn't that a kicker?"

"It certainly is."

"Our mothers were sisters. They didn't want to tell me until I was old enough to handle it."

"Jedi in your family!" Fritz said, revolted.

"They were planning on me marrying Skywalker!"

"You're kidding!"

"Sith's honor! Daddy wants to start a Vader dynasty of Force adepts and there are very few of

us left. Most of the Sith were killed in the Clone Wars and most of the Jedi were destroyed when Daddy helped the Emperor take over. That's why they had to let foreigners into the Dark Lord College."

"But a Jedi!" Fritz exclaimed. "How could you stand it!"

"I haven't told you the rest of their plan yet," Evilla May said. "This is a big secret, Fritz, but Daddy said I could tell you. He likes you."

"I like him, too."

"Well, the plan is to turn Skywalker to the Dark side of the Force. Then he and I can get married and help Daddy overthrow the Emperor. Daddy and Mother will rule the galaxy with me and Skywalker as heirs apparent. What do you think of that?"

"Can I be defense minister?"

"I'm sure Daddy will let you. But C-4UR doesn't know any of this so don't say anything in front of him. He's got a \underline{big} mouth."

"Evilla May, I just thought of something. How are you going to marry Skywalker and rule the galaxy if he's dead?"

"And how do we do that?"

"We're on our way to find a scientist and inventor named Baron Von Vrankensteen. Daddy says he knows a lot about the Force."

"I've never heard of him."

"Oh, yes, you have. We studied him in Imperial history. He built all those droids."

"Oh, yeah. But I thought he was dead."

"So did Daddy. He got a stargram from him last week. Anyway we're on our way to Micirooine to get Vrankensteen and take him back to Daddy."

"Micirooine? That's a restricted planet. They won't give us permission to land there."

"Who's going to ask for it?"

"Evilla May, those Micirooinians are tough customers. If we get caught --"

"We won't."

"Evilla May..."

C-4UR's voice came over the intercom. "We're almost there," he reported.

"Coming," Evilla May answered. "Let's go, Fritz."

morando

The Epoch Vulture came out of hyperspace near Micirooine.

"Half an hour at regular speed and we're there," said Fritz. "Then what?"

"Vrankensteen's lab is about two kilometers north of a town called Transel, these co-ordinates," explained Evilla May. "We come in low over the village, blast everything in sight, blow up the lab, and grab the Baron when he comes running out."

"Isn't that just a little, well, melodramatic?"

"It's a simple basic power play. Daddy does it all the time." $\,$

"Your Daddy has the Imperial Starfleet behind him. What if the town blasts back?"

"So what's your plan?"

"We don't go near the town at all. We land in the woods near the lab, at night, and sneak up on it. C-4UR rings the doorbell; and when the Baron answers, we jump him."

"That's no fun," protested Evilla May.

"We're here to get Vrankensteen," Fritz reminded her, "not ourselves blown out of the sky."

"Oh, all right." Evilla May gave in. "But \underline{I} get to ring the bell."

mononom

The lab was a large stone building on a hill. A single light shone from one window in the tower.

"At least he's home," whispered C-4UR.

"Shut up," Evilla May whispered back.

The three sneaked quietly to the front porch -- except C-4UR, who squeaked a little.

"I told you I needed an oil bath," the droid whispered.

"Shut up."

They stood in front of the door. "All right, ring the bell, Evilla May," whispered Fritz.

"Get ready." She raised her hand and pressed the doorbell.

The porch floor vanished beneath their feet and they fell into darkness.

"Oh, dinglyfeathers!" exclaimed Evilla May.

anamana

Someone was hitting him as Fritz woke up groggily. Evilla May put her arm down and hissed, "It's about time you came out of it! I've been

sitting here for over an hour!"

"Where are we?" Fritz asked, reaching for his blaster. It wasn't there. $\label{eq:constraint}$

"Don't bother," the Sith girl said bitterly. "Someone's taken your blaster, my lightsaber, and all our knives. Even my droid is gone!"

"But what happened?" Fritz protested groggily.

"How should I know? There was a trap door on the porch and some kind of knock-out gas in here. You and your sneaking around! That's the last time I ever listen to you, Fritz William Cher!"

"Well, why don't you just use the Force and get us out of here?"

"I can't," Evilla May growled.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't <u>feel</u> it, you dinglehead! There's something blocking it."

"Like what?"

 $^{\prime\prime}\underline{I}$ don't know. Some kind of force field or something."

"Wrong, young lady," came a cheerful voice from the wall. A viewscreen lit up. It showed an elderly male Micirooinian; at three feet, he was rather tall for his race. "I'm Baron Von Vrankensteen," he continued. "You two are trapped in my new patent-pending non-Force field, an energy field which prohibits use of the Force. Works pretty good, doesn't it?"

"Why, you --- --- !!!"

Vrankensteen looked thoughtful. "You remind me of someone, young lady."

"Don't call me that! My name is --"

"Darth Vader!" exclaimed Vrankensteen. "Why, you must be little Evilla May. I knew your father way back when. Don't suppose you remember me. You sure were a sweet little girl. I gave you a pet dingle for your birthday once. How's it doing?"

"It was delicious."

"I did some work for your father," Vrankensteen went on, not listening. "Must have been fifteen years ago, just after his accident. My, time sure flies. Just look how big you've gotten. Anyway, how's his life-support suit working?"

"Wha--"

"Never <u>did</u> get paid for that, as I recall. Maybe the collection agency I hired will get some results. Oh, well, let's get down to business. What am I going to do with you two?"

"Are you asking for suggest--" began Evilla May.

"Your droid has been of tremendous help,"

Vrankensteen continued. "I've built lots of machines, but I've always liked droids best. They're nice to talk to. I did a lot of talking with your C-4UR, who told me that you were intending to kidnap me. I really can't go along with that, you know. I've got a lot of work to do here."

"But what about --" Fritz started. Evilla May punched him in the side.

"C-4UR made a mistake, Baron," she said loudly.

Vrankensteen's full attention was finally turned on the captives. "That's impossible!" he snapped. "I built that model's prototype myself! It doesn't make mis--"

"But this particular droid isn't in very good condition," Evilla May interrupted. "I'm sure you noticed how beat up it is."

"It wasn't in very good shape," Vrankensteen admitted. "You should take better care of your droids, young lady. 'Take care of your droids and they'll take care of you' \underline{I} always say. That reminds me of an experience \overline{I} once had on --"

"We've got a problem," Evilla May broke in firmly. "A problem that only a person of your infinite wisdom and great scientific knowledge can solve."

"Really?" Vrankensteen asked, pleased. "Well, in that case, come up to the lab. I'll send one of my assistants down to get you." The viewscreen went blank.

"I've changed the plan a little," Evilla May said. "If I could take <u>Skywalker</u> back to Daddy, instead of just the Baron, I'm sure my parents wouldn't be mad at me anymore."

"But your father wants --"

"We can use the non-Force field," Evilla May interrupted. "There's no danger at all. Oh, Daddy will be really proud of me!"

The door to the cell opened before Fritz could argue further. A droid shaped like a short squat human stood in the opening. "I am I-6GR," he said. "I will take you to my master. Come."

Evilla May and Fritz followed the droid up the stairs to the tower where they'd seen the light. It was a large well-equipped lab. Several droids were busy at machines and computers that cluttered the room.

Evilla May looked around for C-4UR, but didn't see him. "Where's my droid?" she asked.

"Where are our weapons?" Fritz added. "We need them for defense."

"I-2GR took the droid down to the oil bathhouse," Vrankensteen explained. "He'll be back soon, cleaned and spruced up. And here are your weapons. Now, what is this little problem you have for me?"

"Well, you've heard of the rebellion against the Empire?"

"A matter which doesn't concern me," Vrankensteen said. "As a scientist I am apolitical and completely wrapped up in my work."

"Good. Daddy told me that you're the greatest scientific expert on the Force in the Empire."

"Well, I have done some experiments," Vrankensteen said modestly. "The Force is just like any other energy source. It can be measured, controlled, and used. It's well those mystical Jedis and their misguided religion are out of the way, I'll tell you. Why, they actually objected to my analysis tests!"

"Baron, here's our problem," Evilla May said firmly. "The consciousness of a Force adept has been sent to another dimension. We need that consciousness brought back to this dimension."

"Hmm," said Vrankensteen. "A job worthy of my genius." $\,$

"You mean you can do it?"

"I don't see why not. The first think we'll need is the adept's body. You brought it with you, didn't you?"

"Well, no," Evilla May admitted. "The body disintegrated during the transfer."

"Careless," said Vrankensteen. "Well, we'll just have to get another body."

"Any particular kind?" Fritz asked.

"No, not really. As long as it's organically alive and the consciousness inhabiting it isn't too strong."

"Well, $\underline{I've}$ got some requirements," declared Evilla May. "I'm going to marry this guy. No offense, Baron, but I don't want a husband shorter than I am."

"Don't look at me," Fritz said hastily. "I've got my body just the way I want it and I'm \underline{not} giving it up."

"But we don't have time to go anywhere else," Evilla May argued. "If we don't get Skywalker back soon the connection will fade and we'll never get him back! Come on, Fritz, be a good sport!"

I-6GR came into the lab and said, "Master, Mr. Antilles wishes to see you."

"Tell him to go away," ordered the Baron. "I'm busy." "Yes, master."

"Wait a minute," Evilla May broke in. "Who is this Antilles?" $\label{eq:continuous}$

"Oh, just the sector representative from the Easy-Tyme Collection Agency. He's not very important."

"Then he's a Micirooinian," Evilla May said in disappointment.

"No, he's from --" Vrankensteen stopped. "I-6GR, show the gentleman up."

mmmmm

Lester Antilles waited nervously on the porch. Baron Von Vrankensteen was to be his first client and Lester wanted everything to go perfectly. His father had gotten him the job with the agency, telling him that it was a great opportunity. Lester was discovering that what was great for his father wasn't necessarily great for him.

Lester picked up his briefcase and followed the droid upstairs to the laboratory. Vrankensteen and two other people were there.

"Hello, Lester," beamed the Baron. "I want you to meet my associates. This is Evilla May and Fritz."

"How do you do," said Lester.

"Hi," said Fritz.

"His looks are passable," Evilla May said critically, "but that moustache will have to go."

Lester patted his upper lip self-consciously. "Uh, Baron Von Vrank--"

"Call me Vonnie."

"Well, uh, Vonnie, there's a little problem with your account."

"Let's not talk business right away, Lester. Tell us a bit about yourself first."

"I wouldn't know where to start, Bar -- I mean, Vonnie."

"Do you have any close relatives?" Fritz asked.

"No, just my father."

"Does anyone know you're here?" asked Evilla May.

"Well, no, not really. I'm supposed to be out in my ship, the *Aged Goose*, looking for a Lord Vader, but I needed some further infor--"

"Antilles," muttered Fritz. "Any relation to $\underline{\text{the}}$ Antilles family of Alderaan?"

"Um, yes, I am. There's not many of us left

now, after --"

"If you're an Antilles masterpilot, what are you doing out here in the sticks?" demanded Fritz.

"Well, I sort of failed my master's exam," Lester admitted. "I get hyper-spacesick."

"I've heard of you," Fritz exclaimed suddenly.
"The lesser Antilles! You've messed up everything you've ever done!"

"A complete failure?" Evilla May asked eagerly.

"I wouldn't go quite that far," Lester protested.

"Never mind," Evilla May said. "You're just what we're looking for: drab, obscure, tame, and a little simple."

"Now wait a minute --"

"You must be thirsty after that climb," Evilla May went on. "Fritz, get Lester a drink."

"Coming up."

"I don't want --"

"Yes, you do," Evilla May said firmly. Fritz handed Lester a tall dark glass. "Now drink it all down," instructed Evilla May with a maternal concern.

Obediently Lester drained the glass. Almost immediately he began to sway. "I guess I'm more tired than I thought," he said before sinking down to the floor, unconscious.

unununun

It was near dawn before everything was ready. The storm was nearing its height as Evilla May assisted with the final preparations. Lester Antilles, still asleep, was strapped to a table in the middle of the room. Baron Von Vrankensteen was everywhere, checking over his droids' work. Evilla May managed to get his attention long enough to ask what would happen.

"It's the lightning," the scientist explained impatiently. "Lightning is a form of energy, just as the Force is. It forms a bridge that can be used, by a properly trained adept, to transfer from one dimension to another."

"It doesn't sound very reliable," Evilla May said.

"Well, it's never been tried before," Vrankensteen replied. "Are you ready to go?"

"Go where?"

"Well, $\underline{somebody}$ has to cross over to make sure we get the right consciousness. It's become a very crowded dimension these past few years."

"Now wait a minute," Fritz broke in. "You can't expect Evilla May to risk --"

"Vrankensteen's right," she interrupted.
"We've got to be sure we get Skywalker, and I'm the only one who can do it. What do I do, Baron?"

"What's going to happen?" asked Fritz.

"When I throw this switch, the electricity will be channeled into her mind, giving her the energy to transfer to the other dimension without destroying her body. Once on the other side, all she has to do is find this Skywalker and stay close to him. In fifteen minutes I'll throw this other switch, which is attuned to Evilla May's brain waves, and bring her back along with any consciousness near her, to this dimension."

"How do you get Skywalker into Lester's body?"

"The second machine will separate the two consciousnesses and send Evilla May's back to her body and Skywalker's into Lester's body. Then we'll put him in the non-Force field for safety."

"Let's get on with it," Evilla May snapped, "before the storm is over." $\,$

"All right," said Vrankensteen. "Remember you've only got fifteen minutes. Here goes the first switch."

Evilla May's body went limp. Fritz let out his breath.

"Wouldn't it be great if this really worked?" said $\mbox{Vrankensteen}$.

Fritz took out his blaster and pointed it at the scientist. "You better make sure it $\underline{\text{does}}$, Baron."

monomoro

Evilla May was floating in a gray nothing. There was a murmuring sound surrounding her. By concentrating the girl began to separate the murmurs into voices, millions of voices, talking, talking, talking.

"Well, I wasn't afraid of Ghengis and I said --"

"The food they served, you wouldn't give to a --" $\,$

"So the Emperor said guilty and then --"

"Hey!" yelled Evilla May. There was sudden quiet near her. "I'm looking for a guy named Skywalker, Luke Skywalker."

"Never heard of him," the answer came back, then the murmuring resumed.

"I was on Alderaan, you know."

"No kidding. I was on the Death Star."

Evilla May discovered that if she thought of moving she seemed to do so. Knowing that she had

little time, she searched as quickly as she could; everywhere she asked for Skywalker.

"Never heard of him," she was told by some voices.

"This is a big place," others said.

"He's a Jedi Knight!" Evilla May cried desperately.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" a new voice said. "The Jedi have their own area. Three hundred meters up and to the right."

"Thanks!" Evilla May shouted; she went swiftly on her way.

anamana

"Six minutes left," Vrankensteen said.

Lester continued to snore on the table.

I-6GR returned to the lab. "Master, the villagers are massing in the square," he reported.

"All right, continue to watch them," V rankensteen ordered.

"What's going on?" Fritz asked.

"Nothing, nothing. Just a little difference of opinion. There's no danger, I assure you."

"What are you up to, Vrankensteen?"

"Look," the Baron pointed, "only four minutes left. We'd better get ready for re-entry."

Fritz glared at him suspiciously and tightened his grip on the blaster.

monomo

The entrance to the area containing the Jedi consciousness was guarded by a blustery male. "Here, here!" he boomed. "You can't go in there, young lady!"

"I'm neither one," Evilla May said. "Besides, I'm looking for someone."

"Who? I'll see if he's in."

"Luke Skywalker."

"Luke, huh? Well, he's in, all right. Heh, heh. Luke's always in. We take turns lecturing him on his foolishness."

"I'm his cousin. Can I see him?"

"Of course not. He's being punished. He can't see anyone but Jedis for the next ten thousand years. Getting off light in my opinion."

"Luke!" yelled Evilla May. "Luke Skywalker! Come out here!"

"Here now! You can't do that!"

"LUKE!!!"

"What do you want?" a new voice said.

"Get back in there!" yelled the guard.

"Luke!" Evilla May asked hurriedly, "you want to get out of this place?"

"Are you kidding? When do we leave?"

"You can't do this!" the guard blurted. "I'm calling Ben Kenobi!"

"We'd better hurry," Luke said.

"Just get as close as you can to me," Evilla May instructed. "Any second now we should disa--"

There was a loud pop and Luke and Evilla May were gone.

"Why does this kind of thing always happen to me?" muttered the guard. $\,$

andronono

Fritz was getting more apprehensive as time went by. Surely it had been more than fifteen minutes already.

"There!" Vrankensteen said in satisfaction.
"She's back and she's brought the other consciousness with her. Now when I turn on the switching machine, Evilla May will be returned to her body.
Like so." He turned the dial.

Evilla May was mumbling as Fritz rushed over to her. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.

His friend's eyes opened. "Who are you?" she asked. "Where am I? What's happened to my voice? Oh, I remember you now. You're the one who blasted me! Help!!"

"Vrankensteen!" yelled Fritz.

"How very interesting," the Baron said. "Apparently the switching machine placed the wrong consciousness into her body."

"You mean Evilla May is in Lester's body?"

Vrankensteen looked startled. "I hadn't thought of that. Let's wake the body up and see."

"No, let's not," Fritz told him. "You wouldn't want to hear what she would have to say. Just get them switched back."

"This one will have to be put to sleep," Vrank-ensteen said, indicating Evilla May's body.

Fritz put his blaster on stun, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

"Now let me adjust the machine," said Vrankensteen. He worked for several minutes. "That ought to do it. Let's try it again."

The machine hummed quietly then turned itself off.

"How long before that stun beam wears off?" Vrankensteen asked.

"I had it on light. She should wake up in about an hour." $\,$

"Okay. I-8GR and '10GR, move Lester down to the cell. He should be ready to regain consciousness." $\ensuremath{\mathsf{N}}$

"Yes, master," said the droids.

"Make sure you turn the non-Force field on," Fritz warned.

"Don't worry," Vrankensteen said impatiently.
"I've got everything under control."

I-6GR appeared at the door again. "Master, the villagers are moving this way."

"How long will it take them to get here?"

"Approximately fifty minutes, master."

"Begin lock-up procedures," ordered Vrankensteen.

"Yes, master." The droid left.

"All right," said Fritz. "What is this?"

"Nothing, I tell you!" Vrankensteen insisted.
"Uh, excuse me while I activate my defense systems."

monormon

Lester had a headache. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. He was in a small room, lying on some sort of table. The Baron was watching him from a viewscreen.

"Who are you?" interrupted Vrankensteen.

.Lester stared. "Uh, I'm Lester. Lester Antilles, from the collection agency. Don't you remem--"

"Don't you feel like anyone else?" Vrankensteen insisted. "Someone completely different from your usual self?"

"Well, I do feel a little strange," Lester said doubtfully. The Baron's intensity was beginning to frighten him. After all, he was in an isolated building with no one else to hear him but droids. No one knew where he was. There was no one to help him, no one to rescue him. Lester was all alone.

"Where am I?" asked a voice inside his head.

"Huh?" said Lester.

"I said what do you mean strange?" repeated



Vrankensteen.

"I'm in someone else's mind," said the voice. "Who is it?" $\,$

"I'm Lester," said Lester.

Fritz came up behind the Baron. "Did it work?" he asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid not," Vrankensteen said sadly.
"Listen to the man. His mind has only been further weakened by his experience."

"Who's Lester?" the voice was saying.

"I'm Lester!!" yelled Lester. "Go away!"

"We're going," Vrankensteen said soothingly.

"Evilla May is coming around," Fritz reported. "She's going to be very disappointed."

The screen went blank.

"I heard people talking," said the voice. "What were they saying?"

"Go away!" cried Lester, backing up against the wall. "Leave me alone!"

"I can't," said the voice. "Try to relax, Lester, and let me share your sight and hearing."

"There's a strange person in my head and you want me to relax?" $\,$

"Look, Lester, I'm not somebody strange. I'm Luke Skywalker."

"How do you do," said Lester automatically.

''Not so good. I'm stuck in someone's head and I can't get out.''

"It's my head!" cried Lester as he ran around the room, trying to escape the terrifying presence.

"Lester!" Luke said sternly. "Calm down. If I could get out I would, but I can't, so it looks like we're stuck with each other for awhile."

"I don't want to calm down! I want my mother!"

''Lester, listen to me. We've got to learn to work together. You've got to relax and let me see what you see and hear what you hear.''

Lester was quiet for a moment, thinking. "You'd really get out?" he asked at last. "I mean, if you could?"

"Yes, Lester."

"You don't want to hurt me?"

"If you get hurt, I get hurt too," Luke pointed out.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, I guess we could cooperate."

''Good. Now, first we'll run over your memories of what happened before we woke up here. Let me see them, too. We've got to find out what's going on around here."

monorono

"What's going on around here?" Fritz demanded. "You're turning this place into a fortress!"

"It really didn't work?" Evilla May asked.

"He's still Lester," Vrankensteen answered, trying to ignore Fritz. "The transfer failed completely."

"I suppose we could make another storm and try it again."

"Not until Vrankensteen explains a few things," Fritz said.

"What kind of things?" Evilla May asked.

"Master," said I-6GR, "the villagers are approaching the front gate. Shall I open fire?"

"That," Fritz said.

"No, I-GGR, we shall only use force as a last resort. I'll come down and reason with them."

"I think you're right," Evilla May replied to Fritz. She turned to Vrankensteen. "What $\underline{\text{is}}$ this?"

"I told you. A small difference of opinion. Nothing to get excited about."

Fritz drew his blaster, Evilla May her lightsaber.

"Oh, all right," said Vrankensteen. "I'm bringing out a new series of droid for this model year, and the villagers are a little upset because the new droids are four feet tall."

"So?" said Evilla May. "Lots of droids are four feet tall."

"Not on Micirooine," Vrankensteen pointed out.
"The villagers say it goes against the will of our Lord Joodie to make droids that are taller than they are."

"What do they intend to do with you?"

"Well, there's been some talk of boiling in oil, but that's just a rumor. My fellow Miciroonians are reasonable people. I just have to explain things to them. Trust me."

"How long do you figure this building will last?" Fritz asked Evilla May.

"Long enough for us to get out if we hurry," she answered.

"Give me five minutes," Vrankensteen pleaded.
"The villagers will go home and we can try the
experiment again. I'm sure it will work this
time."

"All right, you've got five minutes," Evilla May said, "but you better make it good."

"I will, I will," the Baron promised, heading for the door.

"And send C-4UR up here!" Evilla May called after him.

"I will, I will," the answer came back.

Fritz and Evilla May looked at each other. "This was your idea," Fritz reminded her.

"You want to walk home?" growled Evilla May.

arananana

"That's the guy who blasted me!" cried Luke, referring to Fritz.

"Did it hurt?" asked Lester.

"We're in the hands of the enemy," Luke went on excitedly. "Lester, I want you to relax completely, become totally free of tension."

"Why?"

'Because if you're excited or mad or anything, you block me off. I want to try and get us out of here."

"And how are you going to do that?" Lester asked.

"By using the Force. Put your hands on the wall, relax, and let me concentrate."

"All right, I'll try." Lester closed his eyes and tried not to think of anything. After a period there was a burning sensation in his fingers, as if they were near a fire. Then Luke sighed.

"It isn't working. There's some kind of force field blocking the Force." $\,$

"Then it would be a non-Force field, wouldn't it?" Lester asked, rather pleased with himself.

"Don't we have enough problems?" Luke asked. "Lester, it's up to you. We must escape and find Princess Leia and the rebellion. The Force only knows how they've gotten along without me."

"Do you know Princess Leia, Luke?"

Before the voice inside his head could answer, there was a loud explosion outside the building.

"Someone's trying to rescue us!" cried Lester. "Help! Down here!"

There was another explosion, and bits of the ceiling began to fall.

"If they try any harder, they're going to kill us," said Luke. "Lester, get under the table. It will give us some protection."

Lester obediently crawled under the table and huddled on the floor. By now the explosions were nearly continuous.

"Luke," said Lester, "when we meet Princess Leia, could you tell her I'm sorry I spilled the bean soup all over her dress at a state dinner? And the wine, I'm sorry about that, too."

morando

"Five minutes, he said!" yelled Evilla May as the roof fell around her. "Reason with them, he said!"

C-4UR rushed into the room. "Evilla May, those people have the Baron! They said they're going to put on an execution show at the village square and he's going to be the star!"

"Oh, dinglyfeathers!" exclaimed Evilla May.
"I suppose we'd better rescue him."

"Well, all we really need is the switching machine," Fritz said.

A large chunk of ceiling fell on the machine, crushing it to the floor.

"I suppose we'd better rescue him," Fritz agreed. "What about Lester?"

"What about him?"

"Do we rescue him, too?"

"What for?"

"Just asking. Let's go find Vrankensteen."

"You go. C-4UR and I will bring the *Vulture* around to pick you up."

The lights flickered, then went out.

"The generator's gone," said Fritz. "The whole place is going to blow in a minute."

"I'll see you later, then. Come on, you Judas droid."

"I had to tell him," protested C-4UR. "He tortured me! He made me tell him! You're my true master, Evilla May, my only true master..." The droid's voice faded down the hall.

anananana

"Lester, I can feel the Force!" cried Luke.

"And the ice cream," Lester said. "It was purely an accident."

'We're saved! I'll put a shield around us to protect us from falling debris."

"Will it work?"

"Sure it will."

"Then you'd better hurry!" yelled Lester. "The ceiling's $\operatorname{com--}$ "

The roof collapsed under the weight of the castle and buried the cellar in rubble.

anananana

Evilla May brought the *Vulture* to a screeching landing on the village green. The ramp came down and Fritz ran into the ship. Evilla May immediately took off. The villagers, recovering from their surprise, began to lob grenades at it, the *Vulture* quickly left them behind.

"Where's Vrankensteen?" demanded Evilla May.

"Got there too late," Fritz explained, panting. "They were already into the closing number."

"What am I going to tell Daddy?" wailed Evilla May. "He's going to kill me!"

"I'd suggest that you don't tell him anything for a while, say ten years."

mmmmm

In the ruins of Vrankensteen's lab a pile of rubble began to fall, revealing a hole in the ground. Lester Antilles, dirty and dishevelled, crawled out of the earth and stood up.

"All right," said Luke, "let's get to your ship and find the rebellion."

Slowly, Lester and his newly acquired alter ego walked into the woods.

moranana

"Where will you go?" Fritz asked Evilla May as she studied the star map. $\label{eq:map}$

"Sure, why not? School was getting boring, anyway. We can go exploring, maybe take over a

primitive planet."

"Oh, Fritz!" cried Evilla May. "You're the best friend a girl ever had!"

"I know."

The ship lurched suddenly, throwing them to the floor.

"There's just one little problem," complained Evilla May. "The *Vulture* is acting up. Could you take a look at her engines, Fritz?"

"Not the engines," said C-4UR, "the cargo hold." $\,$

"Shut up," said Evilla May. "There's nothing in the hold." $\,$

"Oh, yes, there is," C-4UR said smugly. "I didn't spend all my time on Micirooine in the oil baths." $\label{eq:main_spec}$

"Just what did you do?"

"Well, down by the oil bathhouse there was an old storeroom filled with boxes and machines and things. I loaded them in the cargo hold."

"Hey, that's great!" exclaimed Evilla May. "I'm glad I suggested it."

"We'll have to look through it all," Fritz said.

"It will keep us busy for a while," agreed Evilla May.

"We might find some treasure," C-4UR said.

"You and I will make a fortune, Fritz!" cried Evilla May.

"What about me?" protested C-4UR.

"Shut up," Evilla May said.

"You're going to regret this," muttered the droid.

The Vulture flew on.

THE HARD LIFE AND GOOD TIMES OF HAN SOLO, or

Stopping by Hoth on a Snowy Evening

(to "Love Song to a Stranger, Part 2" by Joan Baez)

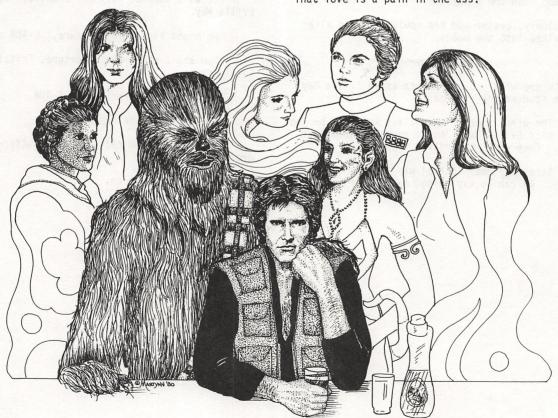
Now what have we got in this bottle they brought? A bottle and one plastic glass; They know that I hate bein' cooped up like this So they brought me some comp'ny with class: A bottle of Alderaan's best.
My thoughts drift into the frozen night, The base is all covered with snow; And lonely they ride on an icy wind To places they're longing to go, To places they knew long ago.

I remember the tall, darkish lady I knew When I was a lad of sixteen, Who slept with me under a burgundy quilt With sheets of real silk in between -- Well, anyway, that's how it seemed. I thought I wanted to stay with her, I drank her like Corelli wine, Her words were gentle and ever so true, And soft were her hands over mine: The first one that I left behind.

I remember the lady I met in a bar, She used to be some kind of monk; She got us both in somethin' over our heads, But managed to leave 'fore it sunk, So we took us both out and got drunk. She laughed like the chimes of a silver bell, Her eyes were a wildernut hue, She danced and she ran with the grace of a deer, And I thought I would stay with her too, For awhile I would stay with her too.

And that marvelous bitch of Corellian blood
Kept telling me I was still young;
She talked just like me and smoothed out
all the lines 'round my eyes,
Saying I was the one;
Forever, that I was the one.
She drank and she cussed and she wrote
us both songs;
She wasn't so easy to know.
We followed each other for over a year;
I couldn't have stayed with her, though:
We both had too far yet to go.

There was that black-eyed beauty from Alderaan:
Two days were never so long!
She stood by the mirror and played with her hair,
But we knew it would end all along;
A little while, and I'd be gone.
So here I sit with my leftover wine
And my one lousy plastichem glass.
I finish my bottle of Alderaan's best
And conclude in my thoughts on the past
That love is a pain in the ass.



Jani Hicks

THE WINDS OF DECISION

JACQUELINE BIELOWICZ

The bright orange rim of Vulcanis slipped over the horizon, sharply casting the homestead into sudden light. The workers in the k'orft fields paid no attention as the star's light warmed the surrounding land and enriched the glittering crimson color of the k'orft. It was not that the workers did not appreciate the beauty of their land, but rather that time was limited during the harvest and the crop was almost too much for one homestead to handle. Only T'Jahl took the time to look up from her work, to gaze with appreciation and apprehension at her home. There was an unusual atmospheric pressure drop and it made her uneasy. Somehow she sensed a threat to the harvest -- but there was no logical reason for it.

ShiKahr, less than three years old, now held 3,000 people, all disciples of Surak. The settlement was laid out in concentric circles, surrounding the Science Study Center. The broad, straight main streets, extended like spokes of a wheel, were lined with graceful buildings that harmonized with the harsh desert. Around the homestead, a narrow band of red, yellow, and purple plant life provided food for itself and trade goods for neighboring homesteads. ShiKahr was an experiment: to prove that Vulcans could learn to live with their desert and still control its harshness enough to feed themselves. Between the scientists and agriculturists like T'Jahl, the Vulcans were learning crop control, irrigation, and a multitude of other related skills that would help the people turn from war to peace.

T'Jahl had been born in a Logician family, raised in the Tenets of Surak, but still she could

not totally control her love of the land. She was a sturdy woman with broad, strong hands. Her coarse black hair, tinged with brown sun-bleached streaks, was pulled sternly back from her almost plain face and bound tightly around her squarish head. She had a wide generous mouth and placid clear eyes under thick upswept eyebrows. As she gazed around her, she gave a small involuntary sigh of contentment. Though half of Vulcan had not accepted the Peace of Surak, she had lived all her 42 years in comparative peace; she had her work, her new homestead, and her Bondmate, Soron, who completed her Joy. The only thing she lacked was a child, but she would have a son when the spring came back to Vulcan.

Suddenly aware of the passing time, T'Jahl returned to the harvesting. Her supple fingers plunged into the rich red soil, skillfully pulling out the edible root and breaking it off neatly. The uprooted plant she stacked on a nearby pile; the stalks would be reduced to fertilizer and returned to the fields. In three more days, she thought, the harvest will be done...

An unfamiliar blare of horns roared across the settlement. T'Jahl's head jerked toward the sound, her eyes widening in surprise. Warriors! She jumped to her feet and ran toward the homestead with the rest of the females while the male workers formed a defensive shield between them and the attackers. Frantic thoughts tumbled through T'Jahl's mind as she quickly dashed through the teeming, but ordered crowds. Where were the guards? How had warriors gotten this close to the homestead without an alarm being sounded? Every citizen knew his job: the males formed the first line of defense while the



younger women formed the secondary line. This would give the older children, the elderly, and pregnant women time to herd the small children to safety away from the attack. But T'Jahl could see that wasn't going to work this time. She could hear the war horns all around the city; ShiKahr was completely surrounded.

The circle of defenders was ruthlessly pushed back. Most of the defenders went down to the blunted end, but often not before felling the enemy with a neck pinch. T'Jahl fought furiously, but she was no proof against two determined Warriors. They pushed her to the ground and with a few rapid movements, bound her hands and feet with hunter's wire. T'Jahl lay quietly, watching the battle continue. Some of the Warriors were beginning to loot the nearby houses; as they did so, gaps appeared in their lines.

Confusion reigned in the streets. Children screaming from fright mixed with the excited yells of the Warriors. Flames licked through some of the houses, adding smoke to the billowing dust. T'Jahl saw Shikahr's Defense Chief, Slin, and a few hundred young men and teen-age boys dashing down a street in a flying wedge, yelling, "Kal-i-ahr!" Immediately, citizens began throwing themselves on the invaders, hampering them in any way they could. Even the children and those bound like T'Jahl did what they could. Slin and his men broke through the enemy lines, scattering out through the desert. They would warn other homesteads and bring back help. Warriors started out after them, but most remained to divide the spoils.

Once it was seen that Slin had made it through, the homesteaders surrendered and an uneasy peace fell over the settlement. At first the two groups stared at each other in disbelief. Then the enemy dwens and dwers shouted orders to their troops. The citizens were rounded up and separated, the men from the women and children. The men were all bound and heavily guarded, but the women were free and only casually watched. T'Jahl sat wearily on the ground, savouring a moment to be grateful that Soron was on a trade mission to neighboring homesteads; then she settled her mind to observe and collect facts. The other women, too, sat quietly, collecting the Peace of Surak around them and calming the small children. The wounded had been collected in a separate place and those who were not despatched by the Warriors were being helped into healing trances by the Healers. But still their guards nervously watched their passive captives.

Other Warriors worked at emptying the buildings of portable loot. T'Jahl noticed that, according to their uniforms, they were of different homesteads. Alliances among the Warriors were not unusual, but that there should be so many different homesteads represented was disturbing. Indeed, the philosophers had predicted that when the Peace movement reached the half-way point among Vulcans, the Warrior homesteads might be threatened enough to combine. It looked as though they had been correct. But the alliance was not solid, if the numerous quarrels that broke out among the Warriors was any indicator. A great deal of time was spent by officers keeping the lower ranks from killing each other over disputed loot.

The Logicians sat patiently in the burning sun as the hours passed. Occasionally a child would cry from thirst. Finally, as the sun was beginning to sink below the mountains, Warriors passed out water and traveler's fare. T'dahl chewed on the tough, dry, but highly nourishing cake and tried to figure out how long it would be before they could expect rescue. She calculated they would have to delay the enemy at least 10 days. But in that time, the captives could be divided among so many different homesteads that they would never be found.

T'Jahl felt someone slip to the ground next to her and turned her head to observe. It was her neighbor, T'Cahyn. The other woman's face was strained, her eyes pained. She murmured softly, "Storn is dead."

T'Jahl felt a sympathetic pain tear through her breast, though her face remained calm. To lose a Bondmate...! "The twins?" she whispered.

"Somar escaped with Sliv; I haven't seen Sasar. I didn't feel him die, but I can't see him with the other men. I haven't seen him since he took the morning meal to the perimeter guards."

The darkness was garishly lighted by the battery powered service lights that the Warrior army carried. The harsh lights overwhelmed the softer lights of the homestead as the Warriors celebrated their victory. Several of the younger women were dragged into the party and became the center of attention to large groups of drunken, boisterious Warriors. Occasionally one of them could be heard screaming. The remaining women huddled together, some softly weeping. T'Jahl desperately recited the Tenets of Surak in her mind, but they were hard to remember within the living nightmare. She and T'Cahyn sat close together, not touching, but gathering strength from each other. Eventually, the madness died down and quiet fell over the stricken homestead.

A slow, cold wind blew over the group, muffling the measured tread of the Warrior guards. One by one, the bruised rape victims crept back into the group who murmured words of encouragement and comfort. T'Jahl watched the wheeling stars, counting off the passing time. The cold stars had a red tinge to them, as if they had become the blossom of the k'orft plant. T'Jahl sat up straighter, hope surging inside her.

"T'Cahyn. The sky. Look at the sky!" she whispered urgently.

 $\ensuremath{\text{T'Cahyn}}$ looked at the intent agriculturist. "What is it?"

There was a faint smile on T'Jahl's lips. "The sky tells me that help is on its way."

T'Cahyn looked bewildered, then said flatly. "That is not logical. The sky is an inanimate thing; it cannot 'tell' anything."

"It can if you know how to read it. There is going to be a molurn. Probably within two yahvee, maybe less."

T'Cahyn shook her hair behind her shoulders.

"Impossible. The molurn season will not be here until after the harvest, more than 17 yahvee from now."

"Remember the Legend of Tar'dekin? Of the monster molurn that blew for 100 days? It blew the homestead Yalkee off the face of Vulcan!"

"That is only a legend!"

"All legends are based on some truth. The meteorologists say that every 5,000 years or so, our planet's orbit is just right around the two suns so that weather conditions cause giant molurns. It's not one storm, but a series of them, and the winds can get up to 150 kilometers an hour. The meteorologists have predicted that it's time for one but they haven't been sure since the science is still so new. But all the ancient records tell of the giant molurns, the ones that are unpredictable and last for many yahvee. I tell you, there is one on the way now."

"And a legendary storm is going to rescue us?" T'Cahyn was patently disbelieving.

"Hardly. But an unexpected molurn could provide us with many opportunities to help ourselves, especially since we know beforehand that it is coming. The suddenness of it will surprise the Warriors and catch them off guard."

T'Cahyn began to understand. "Let's spread, the news."

The two women slipped quietly through the darkness, moving from group to group. By dawn, every woman and child of ShiKahr knew of the coming storms.

With the new day, the Warriors began the lengthy process of dividing up the spoils. T'Jahl and T'Cahyn stayed close together and became part of the 500 new slaves now owned by the Homestead of Myrhe. T'Cahyn had one piece of "good news": she saw her youngest son, Sasar, in the slave lot belonging to the Paldma Homestead. The youth had a wicked laceration along the back of his head, but he was steady on his feet. They exchanged one long glance and T'Jahl knew it was a farewell on the v'k'tyl link, the parental bond that the 14 year-old boy still shared tenuously with his parent.

Shortly after mid-day, the Warriors began moving out, heading back to the safety of their respective homesteads. During the long march throughout the rest of the blistering day, T'Jahl kept watch of the terrain. Somewhere, somehow there would be an opportunity to gain an advantage and T'Jahl planned on being ready with any weapon, any defense.

The desert gave way to the harsh, rocky foothills and the captives found the going a little rougher, particularly the hobbled men who had a great deal of trouble navigating across the jagged, piercing rocks. A strong wind blew a fine dust in the air, adding to their problems. As the sun touched the tops of the mountains, the Warriors gave the order to make night camp. The exhausted captives sank where they stopped, many falling into a light healing trance.

The women were ordered to set up the camp while the children, accompanied by taunting Warriors, were roughly pushed out on a search for khip, the dried animal droppings suitable for night fires. Already the screams of hunting le-matyas were echoing through the canyons surrounding the camp. After the Warriors had eaten and drunk their fill, the women were allowed to tend to the captive men. For most of them, the healing trance had provided the necessary rest; the remainder, most injured, remained in the trance for the night. T'Jahl and T'Cahyn helped serve food and water. Despite the close watchfulness of the Warriors who had forbidden verbal communication, the message of the coming giant molurn was passed along. That night many eyes gazed at the red tinge in the sky.

The evening of the third day found the group at the summit of the mountains, ready for a morning descent onto the plain of Xx'vytr. After two days of the solid ground-eating stride the Warriors set, even the stronger, younger women were exhausted. T'Cahyn moaned as she settled to the ground after the nightly tasks were done. Still, T'Jahl paced the perimeter of the camp, watching the sky anxiously. The red blackness of the night was obvious to all now and a shrieking wind howled from the lowlands. The Warrior guards paced their rounds in pairs instead of singly, fearfully watching the strange sky.

"It will be here before morning," T'Jahl whispered to T'Cahyn. "We cannot be here when it comes. This place is too unprotected. We will have to tell the Warriors so we can move to safer ground."

T'Cahyn jerked herself to a sitting position. "If we tell them of the molurn, we lose the element of surprise!"

"If we don't move from here," T'Jahl responded harshly, "none of us will survive!"

"Specify." The command came from T'Olvut, who had overheard them. Logician and Matriarch of the group, it was she who made the final decisions and acted as liaison with Saur, War Chief of the Myrhe.

"T'Olvut, we could wait out a regular molurn with the normal survival techniques we learned in childhood. But with this giant storm, that will not be enough. The winds alone will be three to four times as strong, and last days: two, or even three, yahvee." T'Jahl pointed out the facts. "The sand could strip the flesh off our bones in a matter of seconds and the electrical disturbances in the atmosphere will cause almost constant lightning storms. There will be great swirling winds that will suck up even great stones. The legends tell us there were also large land displacements, earthquakes and landslides. The atmospheric pressure will probably also vary greatly. Where we are now is just too open. We need to seek shelter!"

"Such as the caves of the Ancients? We could never make them before the storm began, which means getting there will take longer than normal and we will need to travel a path where the hunting is good."

"Will it be necessary to eat animal flesh?" T'Cahyn asked distastefully.

"Not necessarily, but probably. Few plants will survive the winds. We are talking about survival, the most basic kind of survival," T'Jahl answered firmly as a full vision of what could happen settled upon her.

T'Olvut pondered silently as the two younger women watched her. Gazing at the reddening sky, she nodded her head slowly. "I will speak with Saur."

She strode over to the nearest Warrior, speaking quietly to him. After a few moments of argument, he led her off into the night. T'Jahl and T'Cahyn moved around the captive women, wakening them, preparing them for the anticipated move. When the orders came down, the camp sprang into life. T'Olvut rejoined T'Jahl and T'Cahyn as the march began.

"He did not totally believe me," the Matriarch said, "but he is willing to accept that there is an unusual molurm coming and has ordered movement to the Water of Mishak. He expects us to be there only a day or so. Will the Water be safe enough for the giant molurn, T'Jahl?"

"I do not know, T'Olvut, but it is safer than here. Perhaps we will be able to move to a better place after Saur realizes that the molurn is all you told him it would be."

The night march was hellish. The darkness combined with the ever-increasing wind-driven sand to blind the Vulcans. Soon it became obvious that traveling as they were was suicide. The captive men were freed and, linking hands with the Warriors, formed a protective circle. The very small children were carried; the weak were supported by the strong. After what seemed like eons of walking to T'Jahl, they reached Water of Mishak by literally falling into the depression in the land that formed the oasis. They scrambled to the bottom where most of the killing wind was blocked. It was hard just to hear the shouted commands of the women as the men arranged the travel tents into shelters. People huddled together under the lorn hide tents, regardless of whether they were Warrior or captive. Before the winds, it didn't matter.

No one was ever to know how long they crouched in their pitiful shelters. Food and water were scarce. The sand crept under the edges of the tents, filling their mouths and noses with gritty irritations. The heat and smell of their own bodies and excrements added to their agony. Finally, the unceasing sound of the winds and the constant cramped stillness of their bodies numbed their minds to a brute acceptance. Individuals wept softly, howled maniacally with the wind, or died quietly. When the lull came, there were few who were aware of it.

T'Jahl slowly became conscious that the winds had reduced. Disbelieving, she emerged slowly from her refuge. Saur and T'Olvut were already directing salvage operations. The sand and wind were still heavy but it was more like a regular molurn and the survivors were reacting instinctively.

Several of the men were digging for water buried under the oasis while others were sorting the living from the dead. T'Olvut motioned to Saur, and the two of them headed over to T'Jahl.

"Is it over?" growled the Warrior leader. He was a compact man, at the younger edge of middleage. His face was grizzled, set with piercing, intelligent eyes. Even his torn, dirty uniform could not remove his air of quiet dignity and power.

"I don't know for sure, comner. I am not a meteorologist, but if the legend is true...no, this is but a small reprieve."

He and T'Olvut exchanged significant looks, then he shrugged. "Very well, I'll believe you... for now." He strode across the Water, shouting orders to his Warriors.

The precious liquid was painstakingly siphoned from the sand-clogged spring while others of the group spread out in a search for food. All plant life was gone and even the edible roots were difficult to find without their surface stalks to mark their place. The bulk of the captives was put to work digging out a series of trenches, using the surrounding rocks as bases. The survivors were divided up among the trenches to hold two men, one woman and one child. Saur ordered the badly wounded destroyed.

"Kroykah!" shouted T'Olvut.

The Warriors hesitated, looking for confirmation from their astounded leader. Saur bellowed, "You have your orders!"

"Commer..." T'Olvut began when a hard backhand across the mouth from Saur knocked her to the dust.

"You forget your place, woman! You are captive here, not the commander."

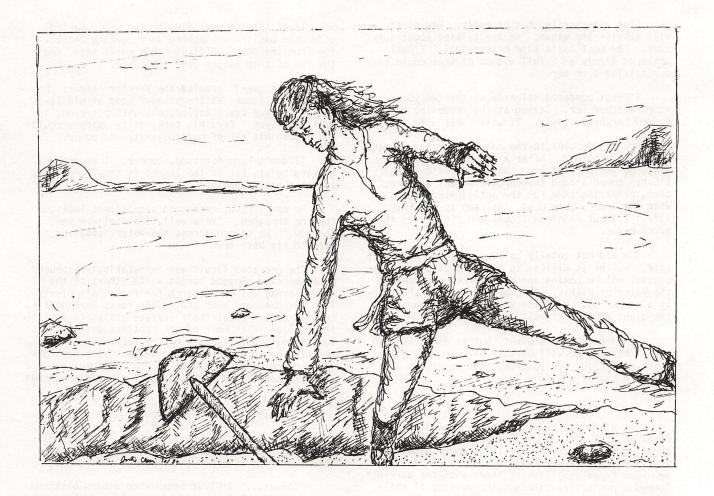
The Warriors swiftly, efficiently slit the throats of the injured as the Logicians watched numbly. T'Olvut carefully rose to her feet, ignoring the blood trickling down her chin. She drew to her full height before the War Chief, calmly meeting him, eye to eye.

"Comner, each life that is brought forth on Vulcan is precious. If we are to survive, we will need all the skill and resources at our disposal. If it is your intention that we all die here, then you might as well kill all of us now. We will tolerate no further destruction of the wounded."

T'Jahl and T'Cahyn moved behind the Matriarch, followed by the rest of the Logicians. The Warriors, nervously gripping their weapons, grouped behind the War Chief. The two bedraggled camps faced each other, the silence broken only by the rising, keening wind.

"Choose now, comner. The winds return," stated T'Jahl.

Saur cast a wary eye to the threatening skies. "For now, I will agree. Time will prove who is right. Now, get to the shelters!"



The returning storm and those that followed were increasingly ferocious. During the lulls, the people moved onward, attempting to find the cave of the Ancients, but it soon became apparent that they were lost in the desert. The skies were obscured by the billowing dust and the pollution from distant active volcanoes. On the third day, the greatly reduced party found an area pocketed with small caves.

The two separate groups had slowly blended together as their numbers were decimated. Each lull brought forth a smaller number of survivors. Twice, a cave they were using collapsed due to the frequent earth tremors. As food became harder to find, they were forced to flee from one place of shelter to seek another, further adding to their risk. The Healer did what he could for the injured, even managing to induce healing trances in some of the Warriors.

Still, even with his skill, some of the injured did not come out of the healing trance, and of those who did, most were unable to take care of themselves or contribute to the survival of the group. At Saur's command, and with the reluctant agreement of T'Olvut, they were put to death.

Slowly, the intensity of the storms began to abate. Everyone was encouraged at the signs of the giant molurn's end. With each lull, there were fewer deaths -- or perhaps, T'Jahl thought, those who were left were true Vulcan survivors. Their bodies were honed down, whip-cord taut, and attuned to the slightest change in their environment. They worked together as a team with few disagreements. When there was plenty of food, they shared equally; when food was sparse, they still shared. Most of their time was spent in hunting food.

T'Jahl was with a hunting party on the forty-first day, digging at the base of a rock outcrop some six kilometers from the cave. She was hoping that she would find wild yelp, a plant that often grew in sheltered areas. She had two children as her assistants; they worked silently beside her, ready to move on her signal if needed, veterans of the molurn's sudden returns. The other adults in the party were skinning out a half-starved baby sehlat they had managed to find while Saur stood guard against the returning winds.

Suddenly the earth began to pitch, yawing wide beneath their feet. Everyone scrambled for safety, but Saur was caught as the earth closed just as suddenly, trapping him to the waist. As the last rumbles of the earthquake died away, the party rushed to the Warrior leader. He was still

conscious and a trickle of green blood oozed out of the corner of his mouth. Two Warriors pried at the earth with their lirpas while T'Jahl knelt beside the War Chief, offering to share the pain in the method taught by the Logicians. The only thing saving Saur from death was a large boulder that had fallen with him; it kept the ground from completely crushing him, but even so, T'Jahl could tell that he was gravely injured.

"No...no," Saur whispered, his eyes dull with pain. "Do not waste the time. You work to free a dead man. Return to the cave while there is still time. Too soon the molurn will return."

T'Jahl smiled gently. "In all else, comner, we will obey you, but not in this." Her blunt fingers found the right point on his shoulder and eased him into unconsciousness. She looked up at the Warriors who had stopped digging on their leader's command and stared at them until they resumed their work. They lifted him out, his lower half grotesquely distorted, and using the sehlat's raw hide as a rough litter, they carried him back to the cave.

The survivors waited for the Healer's evaluation. "The legs and spine are crushed, T'Olvut, but he will live. With a healing trance, he can become strong enough to be taken back to ShiKahr in a litter for further medical treatment."

T'Olvut looked at T'Jahl. "How long before it will be safe enough to travel?" $\label{eq:travel}$

The younger woman did some rapid calculations. "If the storms continue to diminish as they have, we could safely leave here in three days. By then, the winds will be like a normal molurn."

 $\ensuremath{\text{T'Olvut}}$ nodded. "That is acceptable. Put him in the healing trance."

The Healer carefully placed his hands around Saur's head. There was initially some resistance, then Saur's breathing slowed to almost nothing. Those watching released their held breath with a soft sigh. "We must prepare for our journey," T'Olvut said.

While Saur lay in the healing trance, the rest of the group made ready to return home. With the dying winds, large, hungry, frightened land animals crept out from hiding. Only groups of men went hunting now; the women remained behind to guard the cave from predators. Warriors and Logicians alike carried weapons.

The women prepared journey fare, food that would travel well. Though there were other minor accidents, no one else fell victim to the giant molurn. By the end of the second day, all was in readiness.

On the morning of the sixth day, Saur still had not aroused from his trance and the Healer was not able to bring him out of it. He went to report his failure to T'Olvut. "He has gone down so far that I can do nothing to revive him. Since we could not kill him, he has decided to kill himself

this way."

"Can you help me gain contact with him?"

The Healer looked doubtful. "It is possible, but it could be extremely dangerous for you. He could trap you with him and I might not be able to save either of you."

"Proceed."

The Healer reached out his right hand, firmly gripping T'Olvut's hand, his fingers encompassing nearly half her skull. T'Olvut mirrored the action with her left hand on his head. As their minds blended and strengthened with the sureness of practice, they each reached their free hands to the head of the man lying between their crouching bodies. The flickering light from the feeble fire cast shadows of the three people dancing on the wall, like the ancient paintings of the Ones-Who-Came-Before. Beyond their tiny circle, the rest of the world slowly receded, halting all time.

They entered the dark void of Saur, a darkness that was heavy and dismal. From the very edge of Saur's mind, they encountered resistance, a maelstrom of protest. They projected calm determination and searched for the essence that was Saur. After searching for eons through murky passages filled with nebulous figures, they finally reached a solid dark red wall. A thousand war horns blared from beyond it. //LEAVE ME!!! GO NO FURTHER!!!//

They formed themselves into a cold blue wedge, inexorably penetrating the wall. The more it tried to repel them, the stronger, more solid the wedge became. The blue wedge found a flaw in the wall which then crumbled to dust around them. In the center, they saw Saur as he must have been as a young Warrior, in full shiny armor standing before a fire without heat. A molurn blew from a distant mountain, colder than any that had been felt on Vulcan.

They drew up beside the fire and gazed at Saur across the chilly fire. //Saur, we need you. Come with us.//

He smiled sadly, staring deeply into the flames. //As one who lives on the charity of the Homestead? I have been War Chief, and every War Chief before me has died in battle. I will not be the first to live as a cripple. Can your sorcery make me walk again?// With his words, the darkness around them drew closer.

They held a swift consultation and the Healer withdrew part way, to stand ready as a bridge to life. T'Olvut held out her hand. //Saur, my old friend, look at me.//

Slowly he raised his head; old weary eyes looked out of a young face.

//Saur, a new age is coming to Vulcan. No one can stop it, but there is much you can do to speed its way.//

//I don't believe in your Surak!//

//But you believe in life. For centuries,

Vulcan has sent her best, her strongest to die in war. Those badly injured in battle were killed by comrades who thought to spare them the humiliation of uselessness. What of the children they never had? Or of the children reduced to the twilight world of your society until a son was old enough to become a Warrior in order to return to favored status? Has Vulcan ever given way to just the strong, or is it the mind in control, that can think, that overcomes? The Logicians are winning, not because our men are stronger. We win because we do not waste a single person. No matter how badly damaged a child is born, we can find some way for him to contribute. We do not send our young men to die in futile wars, trying to win what our minds and work can earn for us. //

//So, T'Olvut, you would convert me to your ways.//

//Think of it as another kind of warfare, comner.// T'Olvut stood serenely, her hands clasped lightly in front of her. //Only this time the enemy is waste and ignorance. Fight first for your own right to live in dignity, then fight for the rights of others.//

Saur watched her intently.

//After all, commer,// she continued slyly, //it is not as if you do not have some skill in fighting uneven odds.//

From the outer edge of Saur's mind, the Healer watched as T'Olvut argued with Saur. The texture of Saur's mind slowly began to change.

T'Jahl sat at the doorway of the crude tent made from half-cured animal hides, watching the gentle rains that always marked the end of molurns heal the ravaged countryside. They had been

traveling for three days and had finally reached a known landmark. Behind her, Saur finished the soup she had brought him. To Saur, her profile revealed contentment, peace with her world. "What are you thinking of, little one?" he asked.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, faintly amused at being called "little one" by someone who was only larger than her by age.

"My husband is near and the rains will be renewing my fields." She turned to face him. "Will I be going to them both, comner?"

"Yes, little one. My Warriors and I can not make slaves of 'lirpa-brothers'. We have shared too much. Besides, there will be much my people will have to do when we return to Myrhe. It will probably be the toughest battle we have ever fought and we will be using strange weapons...words and ideas."

She nodded, then turned back to the outside as T'Olvut's voice drifted across the camp. The Matriarch stood unheeding in the pouring rain as she directed the packing of new food supplies.

"Tell me, little one, is that one 'bonded', as you call it?" $\,$

T'Jahl smiled secretly to herself. "No, comner."

"Hmm...a most unusual woman." The silence stretched a few moments. "No doubt she would be willing to help me with the finer points if I need it." He sounded half-embarrassed, like a young man about his first woman.

"No doubt, comner." T'Jahl laughed gently.

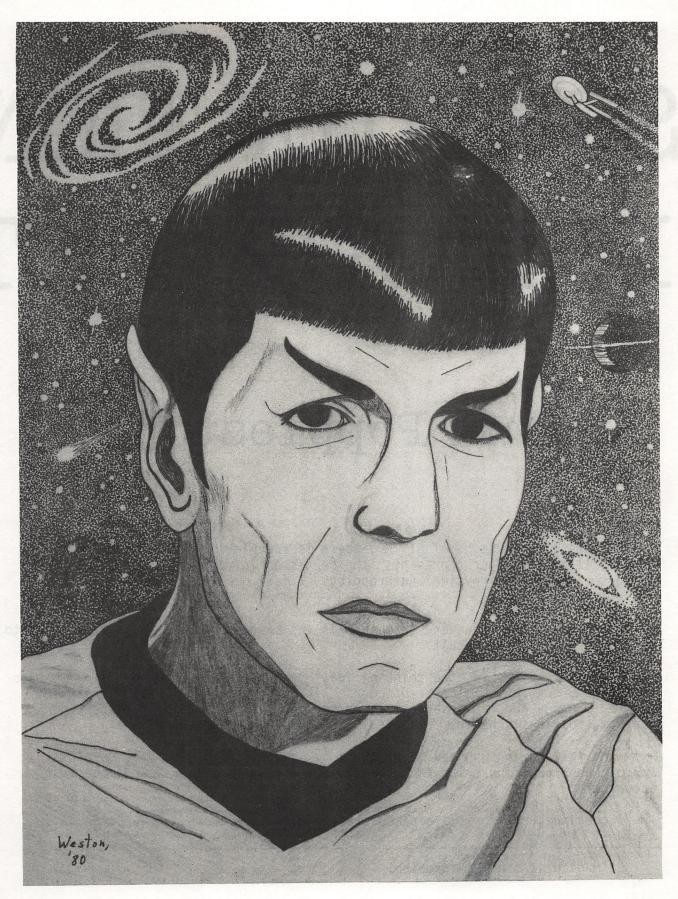
Together, they watched the gentle rains wash clean the earth.

to spock Spock, thy beauty is to me Like that steel-sheened ship beyond That swiftly, through the galaxy A brave and lonely searcher bore From Vulcan's stifling shore

Among the stars five years to roam. Thy wing-shaped brows, thy alien grace, Thy storm-dark eyes have dreams unfurled Of journeys to the depths of space And friendship found on other worlds.

Against the face of undelved night How resolute I see thee stand, Compassion, strength within thy hand, Ah! Sublime vision from that realm Beyond all land! Jennifer Weston

(Patterned after "To Helen" by Edgar Allan Poe)



SPECULATION DEPARTMENT

Ann Popplestone

In the closing scene of ST:TMP, there is speculation that the fusion of Decker, Ilia, and V'ger represents "the next step in man's evolution." As a Masters candidate in Physical Anthropology, I feel qualified to say that that is not awfully likely.

Let us suppose, however, that that is the case. Some taxonamist will have to name and classify the result.

If Homo sapiens is "the thinking man," perhaps the new hybrid is Homo makhos (from the Greek for machine). Of course, it is morphologically very different from H. sapiens and may deserve a whole new genus (it may deserve a whole new kingdom, but that's beside the point): V'gerpithecus? Nasapithicus?

The fusion was supposed to allow it to understand feelings, so perhaps Nasapithecus sentious (with two sub-species, terri and deltans) would be most accurate.

Sometimes, new forms are named after their discoverers. V'gerpithecus deckeri? V'gerpithecus kirki? Sounds weird.

I'm glad it's not my problem.

JANDY

Sheryl Adsit

If y'had to have sand, Solo reflected, it was a damn sight better to have it on Tesoro than on Tatooine. Tesoro had cool ocean breezes to mellow the golden sunshine, a variety of refreshing beverages at hand from friendly beach vendors, and scenery that included a pleasant proportion of humanoid females soaking up Guilder's rays in various states of undress.

What was even more enjoyable about Tesoro was something it did not have -- Jabba the Hut. As far as Han Solo was concerned, that made Tesoro the winner hands down. He hoped that the lyin' bastard was sweatin' out a refrigeration breakdown in Mos Eisley for what he'd put the Corellian through on the last run. The hyperspace exit coordinates he'd been given for a rendezvous with a rampas dealer had put the Falcon smack dab in the middle of Imperial Star Fleet maneuvers. He'd been lucky to escape with the ship still around him, somehow managing to stumble back into hyperspace though most of the sensors were blinded and there was now a large hole where the topside gun bubble had been. With no sensor input and a nav'puter suffering from periodic bouts of amnesia, it was nothing short of miraculous that the ${\it Falcon}$ had landed at Freeport the day before. Solo had sworn to take the repair costs out of Jabba's hide, and the cargo he'd had tucked away for the Hut would be the first installment.

No sooner had he docked than Jabba called: how convenient Solo was in Freeport; now he could pick up a "special consignment" for the Hut, one that would almost make up for the lost rampas shipment. The Corellian, still marvelling at Jabba's gall, wondered how he had refrained from telling the Hut what he could do with his "consignment". Oh, he'd get it, eventually, but Solo was in no hurry to return to Tatooine. Whenever the "special consignment" arrived, it would be stashed aboard ship, but he wasn't movin' one parsec from Tesoro until the ${\it Falcon}$ was well again, and that was final. In the meantime, he'd check out Casino Shore and the some of his buddies. Jabba could count the sand lice in his armpits for all Solo cared.

Han was about to order a refill on his Forellan punch when his attention was diverted by a kid struggling with a large round bundle that threatened to come unwrapped and spill out onto the beach. The kid was apparently looking for someone, and his unwieldy package was not helping any. Solo remembered his own days as a runner and wished the kid luck in his search. The drink vendor was waiting to be paid and Han tossed him a couple of coins before returning to his perusal of the female humanoids.

"Han Solo?" came a young voice at his ear.

"Maybe," the Corellian replied, turning to look at the source and strangely not very surprised to see the kid carefully depositing his bundle on the sand.

"No maybe," said the kid, straightening up and accepting a fruit drink from the vendor, who moved off without waiting for payment. Solo stared.



There was more to this kid than met the eye, if the concessionaire didn't bother him about paying for what he drank.

"Han Solo, Corellian," recited the kid, "captain of the *Millennium Falcon*, Freeport docking bay 102, currently in for repairs. Co-pilot: Chewbacca, Wookiee. Present cargo consigned to one Jabba the Hut of Tatooine in care of various planetary agents." The monotone broke off. "You don't look near as scruffy as Jabba made you sound."

"If that's supposed to be a compliment, thanks, but no thanks," replied Han, annoyed, "and what's it to you if I'm this Solo or not?"

"You're Solo," the kid insisted, "and I'm Sandy," he said by way of introduction. "And if you don't take this," he indicated the bundle with one bare foot, "with you, you might as well write off Tatooine as a port of call, 'cause Jabba'll have your hide for a doormat."

Han scanned the small figure at his side --tanned, hair sunbleached almost white, sea-green

eyes, not more than ten standards old, wearing faded cutoffs and a pullover shirt a size too large, a certain self-confidence evident in speech and manner. Again Solo was reminded of his own youth, and he relaxed a bit. "What is it?" he asked.

"A dew-pearl."

The answer was pitched to carry to the Corellian's ears only, but his reaction could be heard halfway down the beach. "A dew-pearl? That big? I've never seen one bigger than my fist."

"Shut up, will you?" Sandy said angrily. "Or you won't live long enough to see this one. Do you have any idea how many people on Tesoro would gladly kill for a look at this thing? And you go broadcastin' it all over the Shore."

"Then what're you doing with it here?" retorted Solo hotly, though he quieted and looked around cautiously.

"Who'd suspect a kid like me to be carryin' a

dew-pearl, huh? Unless a bigtime Corellian shoots off his mouth, of course." Sandy ducked a half-hearted swing in his direction. "In case you haven't noticed," he continued, "around here guards attract more attention than they discourage. You can look at the pearl when we get to your ship. Now, fold up your mat around the wrappings while I take your glass back to Hollis."

"Aw, leave it," said Han, suddenly impatient. "He's got someone to fetch 'em back for him."

Sandy grinned. "I know. I'm that someone. You don't think I get free drinks because he likes my looks, do you?" He took off down the beach, a glass in each hand.

Solo was waiting at the edge of the beach with the bundle when Sandy returned from the vendor. The kid stared at where the mat had been, then reached down and picked something up from the sand. The Corellian yelled at him. "C'mon, Sandy, quit playin' around."

The kid stashed his find in one of his pockets and trotted over to where Han was waiting. "Let's go," he said.

They started off down the beachfront walk toward the port complex. Silence reigned the first few minutes, then Solo's curiosity got the better of him.

"What did you dig up back there?" he asked.

"Why? You missin' ${\tt anything?"}$ The kid countered the question with two more questions.

Han checked the money at his belt. "Not that I know of." $% \begin{center} \begi$

"Then it must not belong to you," said Sandy, "and what doesn't belong to you isn't any of your business."

"My business is whatever I make it, kid, so quit playin' games and let me see it." Solo was beginning to get annoyed again.

"It'll cost ya. My usual commission is twenty percent of fence value." Sandy was all business.

"Twenty percent!"

"Hey, I gotta make a living somehow. A kid can't live on free fruit punch alone."

"You got a point," Solo conceded. "So you're a beachcomber, huh?"

"The best there is. I can find anything, lost or not." $\,$

"And you're modest, too."

Sandy looked up to see if the Corellian was joking. "I found the dew-pearl you're carrying."

Han made a noncommittal noise, and Sandy went on. "Let's put it this way. I have a talent for finding things, just like you have a talent for hiding things, okay? People like Jabba pay you to

hide things for 'em, and people pay me when I find things for 'em." $\,$

"And you want me to pay you for what you found," said Han.

"I knew you weren't as dumb as Jabba said," replied the kid.

"Thanks. How do you know I'll want it?"

""Because Freeport may be a nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to stay here."

The Corellian's patience was at an end. He grabbed the kid by his shirtfront and turned to face him. "Just what have you got in that pocket? Hand it over before I forget you're a kid and smack you one."

"You wouldn't --"

"Just watch me."

The kid's eyes were wide, focused on Solo's own. Suddenly Han was holding only an empty shirt and Sandy was a couple of meters away, barebacked and grinning. In his hand was a thin plastic strip with magnetic characters along one edge.

"I'll make you a special deal," the kid said. "Give me ten credits and an apology and you can have it."

Solo was thoroughly exasperated. "Just what is it, kid? I don't buy nothin' sight unseen."

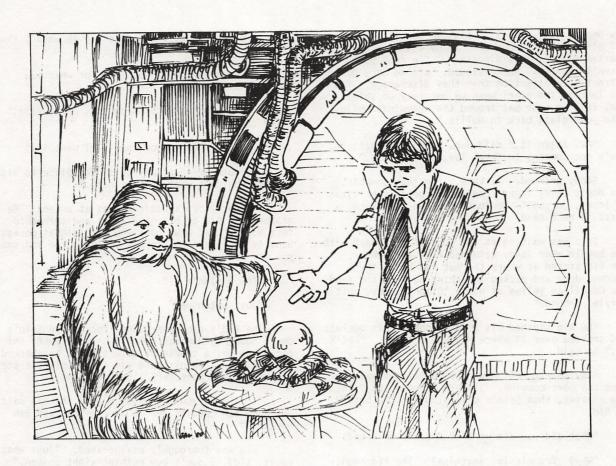
"The receipt for port fees and commissions," Sandy answered. "You know the portmaster. No one leaves Freeport without paying Gennaro, and this is the only proof he'll accept."

"Why, you --" Solo started after the kid, who ducked into a nearby alleyway and began running. Old Freeport was a perfect maze of narrow, twisting streets, culs-de-sac, and abandoned buildings, and it became obvious to Han that the kid was familiar with every inch of that maze. Just when he was sure he had Sandy cornered, a voice from above would remind him to "Be careful with the package." Bystanders would smile knowingly as the kid dashed by, no help at all to Solo, burdened as he was with the dew-pearl under one arm.

The chase had entered the docking bay area when Han gave up and turned toward bay 102 and the security of the *Millennium Falcon*. The dew-pearl would be safe there, and Solo had no doubts that Sandy would be by sooner or later. There was only one market for the kid's find; let the seller come to him.

Chewbacca grumbled a greeting as Solo sauntered into the living area and deposited his burden on the game table. The Wookiee growled a question.

"Whaddya mean, am I responsible for the ruckus in Freeport?" Han answered indignantly. "What makes you so sure it's always me causin' trouble, huh? For your information, fuzzball, there was this punk kid racin' around, stirrin' things up." The Corellian paused briefly, certain he had heard muffled



giggling from nearby.

Chewbacca waved a paw at the package cluttering up his game table, changing the subject.

"That's Jabba's 'special consignment'," Han replied. "A dew-pearl, or so I've been told." At the Wookiee's snort of disbelief, Solo began removing the protective packing from the bundle. "It's probably all padding, Chewie," he muttered, but within a relatively short time they were down to the traditional white samtcloth cover. The Wookiee barked an observation that made Han smile.

"You're right, it does look like a kegel egg," he agreed, looking at the white sphere nested in the remains of the wrappings, "but I don't think either of us should try setting on it to make it hatch." The Wookiee grinned toothily, and a stifled snicker came from overhead. Solo looked around curiously, but went back to the dew-pearl.

Tenderly, almost as though he were unclothing a lover, Han removed the samtcloth cover. The dewpearl was indeed larger than anything he'd seen, and, equally impressive, it was perfectly spherical.

"Didn't I tell you folks would kill for a look at that?" Somehow Solo wasn't surprised to see Sandy's head poking out from behind a bundle of lagan on the overhead shelf.

"Yeah, kid, you're right," Han agreed. His eyes returned to the transparent delicacy of the dew-pearl. "Where did you find it?"

"Not far, really," the kid said, swinging down from his perch. "A friend of mine has a hideout on an island this side of Free. I was paddling a raft around and wound up on the leeward side. I saw something shiny in a bed of schilf reeds, so I went over to get a better look. That's when I saw it. It was bending its reed almost double. I think being sheltered by the other reeds made it turn out so round."

Han nodded; it fit what he'd heard about dewpearls, the protective shell secreted by the dewbug. As soft and iridescent as a soap bubble when first formed, it hardened into a thin, crystalline film within a few hours. Successive layers were added at irregular intervals, depending on complex environmental factors. Dew-bugs lived on plant juices and anchored themselves to the first such surface they contacted in their hatching flight. Usually it was a stem or leaf, which caused their shells to form in a hemisphere. Occasionally, however, as in this instance, a dew-bug would alight on the tip of a plant, but once there it was subject to stronger air currents that would deform the pearl into baroque shapes -- interesting, but not as valued as the perfect sphere. All that remained for this specimen was the insertion of a light source into the dew-bug's former home and enjoyment of the myriad rainbow reflections that would result.

Han gently replaced the samtcloth cover and began rewrapping the dew-pearl. "I don't think Jabba's got the couth to really appreciate something like this," he observed.

"It's not for him," Sandy agreed. "He's got

someone workin' for the Empire he wants to make points with -- in an unofficial sort of way, you understand."

"Yeah, I understand." The Corellian was wise to the practice of palm-greasing. "He'll score high with this, but the rest of us poor suckers won't see anything on the deal." He finished up the package and gave it to Chewbacca to stow, then turned back to the kid. "Just how much is Jabba paying you, anyway?"

Sandy grinned. "You know my rates -- twenty percent of fence value."

"Watch your mouth, kid," warned Solo. "We ain't out in the street where you can pull your disappearin' act. Which reminds me," the Corellian began advancing on the youth, "you've got somethin' of mine I want back."

"Talk to your copilot." Sandy patted his pocket. "He didn't mind parting with ten credits for the receipt. I will accept your apology --" The kid dodged a Corellian fist aimed in his direction and started angling toward the entry ramp.

Any further thoughts of retribution flew from Solo's mind when he heard rapid footsteps outside start up the ramp. Sandy hit the deck as Han's blaster cleared its holster and targeted on the hatchway. "Don't shoot me! I need help," the panic-stricken youth that appeared there cried out.

"Don't move a muscle, or you'll get some real permanent help," Han said coldly. From his position on the other side of the hatch, Chewbacca reinforced that command with a growl. The intruder, caught between the two and some unidentified danger outside, looked as though he were about to melt until Sandy chipped in from his position on the deck

"Wedge, how many times do I have to tell you? Roaming around Freeport isn't like taking a walk down the Esplanade on Alderaan. Captain Solo could've taken your head off just now and been completely in the right."

"You know this idiot?" asked Han.

"Yeah," admitted Sandy, getting up slowly.
"Wedge Antilles. His father pilots for the Viceroy's household. He's asked me to keep an eye on this one whenever they dock in Freeport. Looks like my work's found me for a change."

Solo took a better look at the new arrival. Skinny, dark-haired, he looked older than Sandy by a couple of standards, but the younger kid had a point. Growing up on Alderaan didn't always prepare a person for the rest of galaxy. Solo smiled to himself; even Corellians learned a few things once off-planet. "You wanna see what chased this young fool up my ramp, or should I?" he asked.

"No," Sandy said. "I've got a pretty good idea who it was." The Tesoran boy walked over to the hatch. "Enough's enough, troops," he called down. "I'll take care of him now. Hey, I left you a surprise back at the base, but you'd better hurry before someone else finds it."

The sound of a small group moving away echoed up the entryway. Sandy stayed in the hatch, watching them leave. After a moment, he yelled down again. "Go on, Folie, and take your dumb bird with you." Then, apparently satisfied with the departure, he turned back to the occupants of the ship. "I'm sorry about this, Captain Solo. My friends always round up Wedge for me if I'm not there when the *Phoenix* docks. They, uh, tend to play rough."

"Play rough?" Wedge sputtered. The danger past, the Alderaani youth began asserting himself. "That crew isn't playing. One of 'em's got a homebird that attacks just like a hawk, and --"

"A killer homebird?" Han said dubiously, trying hard not to laugh. "This I gotta see."

"It's Folie's," explained Sandy. ."She's trained it to fly off her shoulder to someone else's on command, but that's all it does. It only looks like it's attacking."

"How was I supposed to know it wasn't dangerous?" said Wedge, defensively. "I've never seen a homebird do that."

"Neither have a lot of folks, which has kept Folie's skin in one piece on a number of occasions, so don't feel bad. Just be glad the bird didn't do something else to you," Sandy said. "Now I think it's time I took you back to your ship; you've been out long enough." He started herding Wedge toward the hatch.

"Oh, I just remembered. Father wants to see you about finding something for him."

"Do you know what he wants?" asked Sandy on the way down the ramp. $\,$

"I think he said something about a couple of droids," Wedge said, his voice fading as the pair left the docking bay.

Chewbacca barked an observation across the cabin to Han, who was finally holstering his blaster. "Naw, Chewie," he answered, "I don't see a resemblance to anyone I know. Who'd you have in mind?"

The Wookiee grunted and Solo looked at him.
"Me? You've gotta be kidding. For one thing, the kid's blond and I'm not. Besides, you know I never --"

Chewbacca cut him off with another remark which caused the Corellian to splutter, "Personality?!? What do you know about personality, you great shaggy lunk?" Han began advancing on his partner. "I was never an obnoxious brat. I had respect for my betters. I never led anyone on a wild goose chase through the Old Town..."

The Wookiee's paw descended on the top of Han's head and patted it gently. He gave Solo a toothy grin before padding back to the sensor station to finish the repairs. Han stood in puzzled silence a few seconds longer, then disappeared into the topside gun access muttering, "Kids! Wookiees! What next?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

Haiku: Merlin & His Familiar

You conjure answers, Pull rabbits from hats with ease, Dispel fears, end doubts.

Magician, wizard, Brave Merlin of the Future: Kirk -- Starship Captain.

You guard emotions, Follow discipline's tenets, Maintain self-control.

Student of logic,, Trained in Science, Mathematics: Spock -- First Officer.

Adept reasoning, Impulsive intuition; An unlikely pair.

Yet, you've become one --Child of Vulcan, Child of Earth --Together, complete.

Eternal Soulmates.
Merlin and his Familiar.
Masters of the stars.

Diana Rusnak

Dolorem

I never meant to trade The warm salt taste of flesh For the silver sweep of metal wings, Or to forsake companionship For lonely vigils of command. Yet now, encased within these walls, (Beloved/Hated stifling walls) My blood's a sterile metronome Pulsing to the engine's flow. I track the endless vastness down While entropy feeds upon my soul. Mummified, Stultified, In this my stainless tomb, I mimic all the warm concerns Of Humankind, Yearning for the passions I once knew, But locked within the stark embrace (Desired/Resented chill embrace) Of silver ship and iron command.

Three by

Rebuff

You come to us, Expecting us to join your Federation, Extend our hand in welcome To you, the Bringers of Death, The Warpers of Souls, and Maimers of Minds. It will take us generations To undo the harm you caused With your insatiable curiosity, Your "cultural observer". Oh, we are duly grateful For his belated removal. We note your apologies, but We offer no alliance. Our streets are littered with the dead, Slain because YOU interfered, Seeking knowledge of our people. We pay the price of your education. Go now, send us no more saviours, For they are but the plague-carriers... The harbingers of Death. Begone!

Dayle S. Barker

A friendship dies...
And part of yourself dies, too,
Weeping for what has been lost;
The love that flourished
In the dry and dusty places
Of your life.
The love that stood serene and strong
To say "You are not alone...
I walk the road with you."
A friendship dies...
And another corner of your heart
Dries up and blows away
In the cold winds that push us
Down the road...separately.
The tears streak down my cheeks unseen,
To leave them lined and old.
Oh, bitter is the taste of friendship won
And lost.

Hyperspace an' Freedom Jani Hicks

(to "Philadelphia Freedom" by Elton John & Bernie Taupin)

I've always been a rollin' stone, y'know, When the price was right I'd leave to find the answer on the road. Don' wanna be a heart beatin' for someone -- Nothin's ever changed; The more I talk the less my work gets done.

CHORUS: 'Cause I live an' breathe for hyperspace an' freedom.

From the day that I was born I wanted to fly -Hyperspace an' freedom hit me right smack in the eye -First a quick hello an' then a fast goodbye.
Hyperspace an' freedom shine on me, I love it -Shine the light through the eyes of the ones left behind.
Shine the light, shine the light;
Shine the light, won'cha shine the light...
Hyperspace an' freedom I love you -- yes I do.

You know I'm always gonna live my life alone
'Cause I can't stand the city;
I'm already thirty years out on my own.
I like living easy without any family ties
'Cause that hyperspace an' freedom zapped me right between the eyes.

CHORUS

BURGER TREK

Ingrid Cross

PART ONE

"One more, into the breach, dear friends!"

The starship *Enterprise* was headed nowhere in particular. As they cruised across the galaxy, Captain Kirk seemed to be daydreaming -- probably about his last date three years ago, Spock thought. Chekov and Sulu were playing blackjack and Uhura was flirting with a Wookiee.

A sudden shrieking siren scared the fearless leader into hysterics. It took a moment for Kirk's befuddled brain to absorb the fact that it was merely the red alert signal whooping painfully in his ears. He swiveled his chair around and screamed at Lieutenant Uhura.

"WILL YOU TURN IT DOWN, LIEUTENANT?"

She did so, saying sheepishly, Sorry, sir."

"S'alright," he muttered. He turned to his emotionless first officer. $\ensuremath{\mathsf{H}}$

"Hey, Spock? What's goin' on around here?"

The Vulcan turned to face his superior, wishing logically that the captain would one day think of a different remark. This one was getting rather tiresome. "Captain, sensors indicate that an ion storm is heading directly toward us." Of course, he added silently. Who else but this crew of ninnies would get into so much trouble?

Kirk's face went even whiter than its normal, pasty shade. Not only was he scared out of his wits (what little were left after so many dangerous missions), he was terribly upset. The weather forecast (and the original script) had called for clear blackness with sparkling, shiny stars for the entire episode. "Can't even trust the writer anymore," Kirk muttered angrily. "Steer around it, Sulu," he ordered.

"Can't, Captain," the helmsman replied with a sickly grin, knowing what happened to crewmen who talked back to the captain.

"Why not?"

"Well, sir. The controls are frozen...see this little red button? It's stuck, sir. And besides, the writer needs to have the storm hit the ship."

And just to make him feel lousy, the writer said, "Let there be an ion storm."

And there was.

(INSERT COMMERCIAL HERE)

PART TWO

"Anything that can go wrong, will.
Especially on my time." (Captain James T. Kirk, hapless leader of the USS Enterprise.)

Kirk, despite his weak legs and upset stomach, had rushed over to help Uhura stand up. As was his intention, he caught a glimpse of very unofficial blank panties. After tearing his eyes away from her twisted skirt (and flashing a leer in her direction), he asked Spock: "What is our present situation?"

"A moment, please, Captain," he said as he turned away from the innards of the console before him. Spock punched some buttons on the computer and muttered what Kirk thought must be Vulcan obscenities.

(Whirr, click.)

"Captain, we have lost all power in our engines. It seems that there was, during the ion storm, a place in the structure of space that twisted up the shape of time and set us here." Spock looked extremely pleased with himself.

Kirk was not about to let on that he had not understood one single word. "Recommendations?" It was, after all, a safe thing to ask.

"I have none, sir."

I must be going mad, thought Kirk. SPOCK doesn't have an answer? "Well, then, what can you tell me?"

"All I can say, Captain, is that we're not where we were."

During this last statement, the elevator doors opened, and out stepped Doctor Leonard McCoy, galactic quack, in time to hear where they weren't.

"WHAT?"

"I said, Doctor, that we are not..."

Kirk interrupted and asked, "Spock. Tell me ...very calmly and slowly...where are we?"

"Captain, according to the screwed-up computer, we are in orbit around the Earth. And the time is now 1980, by the old Earth calendar." $\,$

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other. Both had vivid memories of trips to old Earth through a mix-up of space and time. "Oh, Lord, no," they chorused.

And in the background, Uhura fluttered her eyelashes and delivered standard speech number 486c. "Oh, Captain! Ah'm frightened!"

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At Kirk's reluctant order, McCoy and Spock found themselves waiting with Kirk in the transporter room. The captain had decided, against his own better wishes, to beam down to the surface. Perhaps they could gather some information on this lost era of Earth's history. And of course, in the process perhaps Kirk could pick up another medal

for his blind courage.

"Sir, I believe we will be extremely out of place in our uniforms," Spock nagged.

"Stuff it, Spock."

"Captain?"

"Never mind. Let's go."

And the transporter sparkle (with the help of a special effects man) enveloped the three men and scattered their molecules across space and (hopefully) onto the planet's surface.

PART THREE

"We're off to see the wizard..."

It was nearly dark when they reappeared, and McCoy immediately began complaining. $\label{eq:mcCoy} % \began = 0 \end{substitute} % \began = 0 \end{substi$

"Couldn't you have waited until tomorrow to beam us down here, Jim? Bad enough tryin' to get over the feeling that I'll never reassemble correctly, without appearin' in sheer blackness. I can't see well enough to check if I'm all here!"

A Vulcan voice boomed out at him. "Doctor," Spock said dryly. "I assure you that your entire chickenhearted body is standing intact beside me. In fact, your boot is planted firmly on my foot."

"Shut up, both of you," Kirk said affectionately. "Take out your tricorders and get some --"

A rather large object sped by the three men, nearly knocking them on their posteriors.

"What the --!" McCoy and Kirk yelped.

"Fascinating," Spock said predictably. "I believe, Captain, that we have just seen an example of an automobile. It was a vehicle, diesel or gasoline powered, which emitted large quantities of carbon monoxide and other harmful gases. It was used to transport people from one point to another."

Kirk stepped out from behind McCoy, where he was hiding. "That piece of history nearly killed me, Spock! I could be dead right now because of it!"

Spock began fiddling with his tricorder, but did not turn away fast enough to allow Kirk to miss hearing a muttered, "Pity it missed."

The captain stood still for a long moment, doing his usual task of landing party duty: nothing. He cleared his throat importantly. "Well?" he said, the most intelligent thing he'd uttered for quite a while.

Spock pointed to their right. "Sir, readings

indicate there is a source of energy coming from that rather large building 9.96510 meters away."

Kirk and McCoy looked in the indicated direction. Through the darkness, they could barely see the structure. "Any indication of life forms inside, Bones?"

McCoy seemed to have trouble reading the dials on his instrument. "Jim, my tricorder says that there are approximately 63 humanoids in there. However..." and he frowned for effect, "I don't get any reading on intelligence."

Spock's eyebrows threatened to fly right off his face. "Strange, Captain. What information we have on this era would tend to disagree with this quack you insisted on bringing down here. The late 20th century was a violent period in your world, but they seemed to be halfway intelligent."

Kirk shot a sour look in Spock's direction. "Intelligent? Trying to knock off a very virile, successful and (should I say it?) handsome starship captain from their future?"

"Captain, I suggest that we take a look and find out exactly what precious trivia I can store in my computer when we get back to the ship."

A quiet muttering came from McCoy's direction, sounding suspiciously like, "Do we really have to?" But no one paid any attention to him, as usual.

A few moments later, Kirk and the others entered the building (with the captain carefully shielding himself with the bodies of the other two). The noise level clashed with his pitiful attempts to be heard. "Mr. Spock, opinion?"

"You always ask me that."

"What?"

"I said, I'm not certain. I need further readings." $\hfill \hfill \hfi$

McCoy's delicate nose wrinkled in disgust. "What \underline{is} that smell?"

"I believe, Doctor, that it is animal meat," Spock said, trying to control his stomach's quivering movements.

Kirk thrashed around and finally got a view when the crowd moved away a bit. "What on Jupiter...?"

A hand pulled on his arm and a voice started hammering away at him from somewhere in the direction of the middle of his chest. He looked down (not a far bend) to find a woman dressed in a dark red shirt and black pants. In his distraction, she took control.

"I thought I told you I needed you here at 4:30 today? Well, no matter. I need you now. Didn't I tell you that Fridays are our worst nights?"

"Ma'am?" Kirk tried to push her hand from his arm.

As she spoke again, this time with more distraction, she began pulling him past a side of the large room filled with tables and uncomfortable-looking chairs toward a door near the end of the room.

"Who are those two behind you?" she snapped.

"Um. Well, you see, we're from..."

She pushed the door open and the three men found themselves in what Spock would later call a "primitive food preparation area". At the moment, though, all the Vulcan could think of was trying to avoid throwing up as fresh smells assailed him.

The woman never stopped talking as she dragged them past several young people who were performing strange ritualistic motions with their hands. "My name is Susan. I'm the manager. Anything you need to know, you come to me. Or to Ruth, the one with the dark hair standing over there, talking to those two kids. No matter who you talk to, it gets back to me." She paused for a moment and ran off in one direction after eyeing their uniforms and pronouncing them "strange".

McCoy started to speak, but noticed that the first officer and captain were observing the strange activities. On one side of a partition, people were shouting strange words over an old-style microphone. Others were running back and forth with white bags. On the opposite side of the metal partition, other people threw -- meat? -- and bread together, after tossing various pieces of vegetables between the layers. Spock found it all bewildering. McCoy had to raise his voice to be heard.

"Jim, I didn't know that all the people were so short in this era! But then..."

A furious red ball of energy flung herself into the small room. "I HEARD THAT! No talking on the job!" She threw three pieces of cloth at Kirk. "These are your uniforms; put them on!"

Spock looked at his commanding officer, who shrugged fatalistically. *Obviously*, Spock thought, the woman is mad. He knew that Kirk would be relying on him once more to try and figure out how to deal with her. Great Father of the Deserts, but he was getting tired of having to be the brilliant one week after week! Too bad Kirk didn't have the brains to cope with most situations. After all, the captain got paid far better than a first officer, yet Spock ended up doing most of the work time after time.

"Now, said Susan. "I'll put you on front boards, with Fay. She's good, and she'll show you what to do." She shoved McCoy toward the long counter, and his face reflected sheer terror.

"Okay, you do the tops," said Fay to the doc-

Susan deposited a damp cloth in Kirk's hand and shoved him toward the door. "You keep the

dining room clean." Kirk started to rebel until Spock reminded him that their lives depended upon how cool he remained. With that, the captain was happy. He could play the hero once again, if all went wrong, quite well.

Spock was in Susan's hands alone now, and she began steering him toward the source of the noise: the microphones. "You should be able to catch onto this quickly. You look somewhat intelligent. More so than the other two, anyway."

Spock began agreeing with her. "My intelligence quotient is..."

The man to whom the first officer had been delivered rolled his eyes. "Sure, Susan, sure," he said in a tone which Spock recognized as patronizing. He filed it away as a good example of how he'd respond to James Kirk one of these days. "You're starting him up front, tonight? On a Friday night?"

"Yup. Do you really need me? I've got to run. I know it's only 5:30, but well, you see..." And she was gone.

People were running between and around Spock and the man whose tan shirt read "Asst. Mgr."

Interesting, thought Spock, wondering what an asst. mgr. did in this insane asylum. He quickly tuned in to hear what the man was muttering.

"Why me? On Friday night? There's only about 150 people waiting in line. Could be worse." He turned to Spock and sighed. "Well, you look smarter than most of the others we've hired lately. Better than that one out in the dining room." Another sigh. "Okay. Come on, this is how the machine works."

Thirty-five seconds later, Spock understood perfectly how the machine worked. Dave moved off, and another girl took his place. She had blonde hair, and her grey eyes seemed alarmingly vacant. She leaned closer to the first officer and whispered, "Hi! I'm Judy, and I'm friendly."

Before he could reply, she was swept away by other people scurrying around. Spock decided to play along for a while, until he could think of a way to get out safely from the clutches of these insane humans. He faced a man across the counter and waited patiently. What he heard next challenged even his language capabilities.

"Onedoublebeefburgernoonionsextrapickles. Got that? Okay. Fourwhooperswithcheesepicklestomatoesmayoonly, threelargefriesnomakeitfivesmallcokes. That's it."

Spock had managed to catch the man's words and had hit the correct discs to end the sequence on the computer, when a bloodthirsty yell tore the air.

"Dana! I'll KILL you, do you understand me? Get out of the way!" $\label{eq:condition}$

Spock looked around and discovered that the young boy next to him at another machine had been thrown onto the floor and was being stomped by Dave. He made a quick consideration: should he use this moment as a diversion, or try to help? His worse instincts took over, and he touched Dave's shoulder.

"If I may be of assistance?"

When Dave turned to him, Spock was shocked to see that his face was an alarming shade of red. "He turned the damned machine off! On a Friday night he just had to put his finger by that switch and turn it off! I'll kill him for that!" And sure enough, the man was lunging toward the hapless youth lying prone on the floor.

"Sir," Spock interjected rather hastily, for a Vulcan. "If you would explain the function of the switch...I have had some experience with computers."

"No. I don't believe it. I don't believe that on a Friday night the heavens would just drop an electronics expert into my lap."

"Sir, take hold of yourself." As the man settled down, Spock nodded with satisfaction. "That's better. Now please explain."

"The entire memory is lost."

Spock lifted the lid from the machine and pulled out a program board. "Let me see. Rather an elementary problem here." And he set to work, using the point of a pencil and his long fingers to repair the damage.

A few moments later, he straightened, and replaced the machine's lid. "Quite an easy task, sir. I merely cross-circuited this panel here and..."

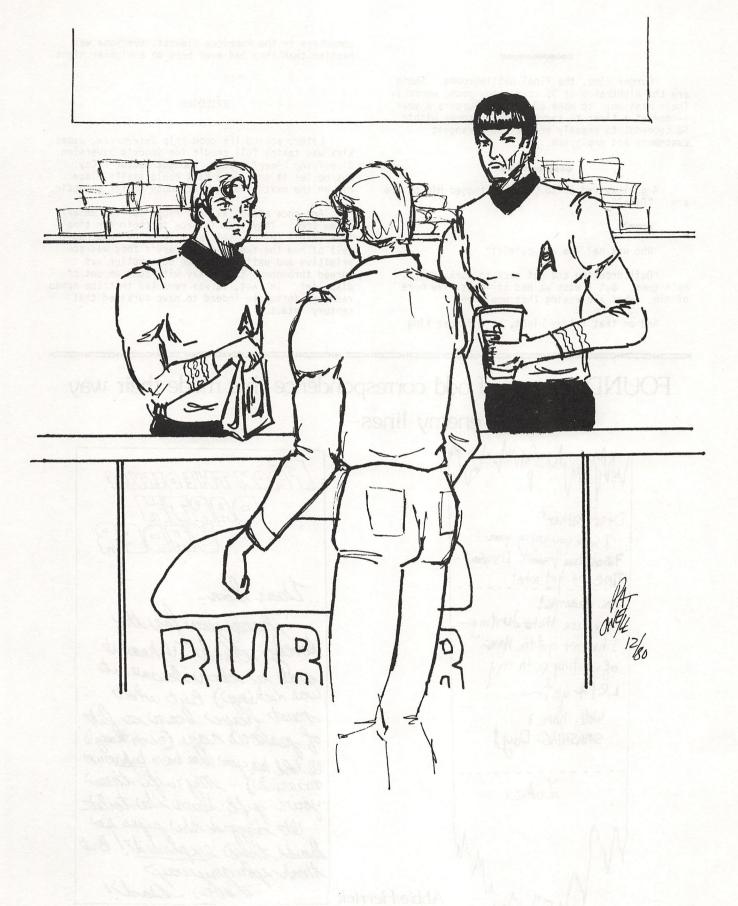
Instead of grateful quiet, the din grew worse. Dave turned to the quivering man responsible for the mishap and screamed, "It'll be a long time before I let you even come within slapping distance, Dana! You've got broiler position for a year!" Dana slunk out of the corner of the outer room and into the back.

From the corner of his eye, Spock could see that Kirk and McCoy had made it outside and were beckoning to him to leave, also. But he had unfinished business.

"Sir, I believe that you were too harsh with the young man. Please reconsider. Perhaps he has yet to grow and mature to reach your level." Personally, though, Spock doubted that was possible. However, he felt he should say something. He had to grab the chance while the scriptwriter was in the mood to dole out some measly lines.

"You're telling me," Dave muttered. Then, as the realization hit him, he said in a voice full of awe, "Hey! No one sticks up for Dana anymore! Not even Linda or Julie! Why? --"

He turned to look into the back room where Dana was working quietly. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Thanks..." But when he turned back, Spock was gone.



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"Burger King, the final battleground. These are the nightmares of 36 courageous young workers. Their mission: to make 60 million burgers a year -- one at a time; to serve every customer within 60 seconds; to bravely endure the strangest customers and employees..."

00000000000

"Hmmm?"

"Who was he? He was cute!!!"

"Quit drooling and get back to work, Kathi. He's gone. But I wish we had at least five more of him. What a blessing that would be."

And on that Friday night, at a Burger King

somewhere in the American Midwest, everyone was happier than they had ever been on a similar night.

EPILOGUE

Later, aboard the good ship *Enterprise*, James Kirk was taking full credit for Spock's diversion. *Glorifying himself again*, thought Doctor McCoy. But he let it go, since Kirk could easily place him on the next landing party duty roster -- again.

And once again, all was right for the <code>Enter-prise</code> crew. They made it back to their own time line safely (of course), and the tales they had to tell of how the twentieth century's food was so primitive and unfit for human consumption was spread throughout the galaxy with some amount of disbelief. In fact, it was remarked that the human race was fortunate indeed to have survived that century intact.

FOUND: pieces of odd correspondence that made their way through enemy lines-

Dear Father"

I hope you enjoy your

Father's Day present. It's about

Time you got what

you deserve!

Excuse the handwiting—
I haven't got the HAME

of writing with my
Left yet

Well, have a

SMASHING Day!

Luke

Abbie Herrick

Dear SonThank you for the lovely clock (I know it was a clack because it was ricking) But what must have been a fit of palous rage (eventhough told hor you were been a fit of palous rage (eventhough whereby) - My wife them your gift show the toilet. It closged the pipes so had they exploded! But thouk you anyway Love, Dad!

The time will come, my friend, when I must leave, When all we have built will crumble at my feet.

Oh God...No...

Don't let it end that way.

Spock...promise me,

Promise me that when I go
you will let someone else share
that which is in you.

For you...are someone very special,

And I am proud
You call me friend.

frieno

It's been six months since his death,
And I see what it has done to you.
You put up that impenetrable wall,
and won't let anyone in.
Yet I remember a time when you would.

Yes, he was special, and you let him call you friend.
But, damn it, Spock, he was my friend too!
Let me in
Let me share the grief within you...
It shows in the depths of your eyes.
He wouldn't want you to be this way.
You must accept, just as all of us have had to accept,
The shock of his death.

But, you know, his memory will live on, for we will always remember That special man who called you 'friend'.

SUSAN FINE & CAROLE BERGER

Love Gift

Two by

For you

I charted stars amidst a midnight heaven and blazed fire trails in eternity

For you

I claimed new worldssthat they might honor your beauty and your worth

For you

I watched long hours dark with dread and praised the singing dawn

For you

I walked alone and called no place my home and held my heart in silent, patient love

For you.

Parted from Me

Wherever our tomorrows take us,
 Though distance may divide us
We are not separate--but one.
With each dawn of renewal
 I shall greet the newborn joy that lit your eyes.
Each thing of beauty which delights
 Will be part of your wonder;

Each gentle smile I meet will hold A trace of yours;

And if I learn to treasure more The quiet hours before stardawn,

It will be because that time Brings thoughts of you.

Wherever you are,
You will be in my thoughts a

You will be in my thoughts always; And in my thoughts

We shall be forever one.

CHARLA MENKE

(translation from the Vulcan)

The Gold Against The Fire

CATHI BROWN

As the *Enterprise* sped on course for Starbase Nine to pick up supplies, Captain Kirk sat behind his desk reviewing the service record of xeno-sociologist Lieutenant Taz Larkdow who would be joining the ship there. It was a 'standard résumé that could have belonged to any young lieutenant in the Fleet. One piece of information stood out from the rest; the lieutenant was of Triyazian stock.

Kirk cast his mind back and brought forth what information he could recall of the race. The Triyazian were rather new to the ranks of Starfleet — though a long-time member of the Federation. It was a culture that remained aloof to outworlders, yet intermingled by ways of scientific interest. They were — on the average — renowned scientists.

The captain's eyes went back to the résumé once again. Yes, he thought, the lieutenant would be just what the doctor ordered, the perfect replacement for the vacancy in the science department.

Lieutenant Taz Larkdow once again glanced at the chronometer at her wrist and found she still had time to kill before reporting to the transporter levels prior to beaming ship-side. She let her wrist fall back to her side as her eyes gazed about the milling crowd of the starbase mall. Such a mixture was hard for a Triyazian to visualize -Andorians, Tellarites, Vulcans, and of course, the ever-present humans.

Taz had nothing against humans. They were very beneficial in their ways, if only they weren't

so open in expressing themselves. With all their superstitions and myths, she found it hard to believe that they had still managed to make it into space. She shook her head at her own contradictory thoughts. The had made it into space, and it was their very openness that had allowed the Triyazians into Starfleet, a fact that Taz was very grateful for. What better way could there be to explore the galaxy and its boundless wonders? Besides, as a member of the Fleet, one soon became used to humans.

She turned away from her thoughts and started to make her way to the lifts that would take her to her destination. Before entering, though, her attention was caught by a clever display of space holographs, aligned on a nearby wall. She stared in fascination at the wonders of space and the multitude of discoveries that awaited her out there.

Doctor McCoy was already in the transporter room when Kirk and Spock arrived. At the captain's nod, Kyle started the boarding procedure. "Energizing, sir."

The transporter hum began to fill the area and soon a short, slim figure coalesced on the dais. The figure wore the blue Starfleet tunic that designated her field of service. Kirk's eyes played over the new crewmember, taking in her short burnished-brown hair, the honey-dew skin, and golden eyes with their flecks of brown dust, characteristic of the Triyazians. She held herself with an aloof quality, as her eyes swept the room and lit on the captain of the *Enterprise*.

Kirk stepped forward. "I'm Captain James T. Kirk and this is my First Officer Commander Spock."

"Captain...Commander," Lieutenant Taz Larkdow acknowledged correctly, her voice friendly. "Lieutenant Taz Larkdow reporting for duty, sirs."

Spock gave a cool but welcoming nod, while Kirk smiled at her. "Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*, Lieutenant."

"The honor's mine, Captain," she replied.
"The *Enterprise* and her crew are well known."

"Thank you on behalf of all of us," Kirk said graciously. "Mr. Spock is also our science officer. You'll be reporting to him," he added, once again all business. Was there a hint of humor in her expression? Kirk had no way of knowing. A discreet cough behind him reminded him of McCoy's presence. "Lieutenant, this is Doctor Leonard McCoy -- ship's chief surgeon."

"Doctor," nodded Taz in McCoy's direction.

"Lieutenant, if you would come with me, we'll get the required physical out of the way," added McCoy, his manner professional.

"Yes, sir," agreed the lieutenant, following the doctor from the room. $\,$

During the weeks that followed, the lieutenant settled into shipboard life. She liked her work and was good at her job. There were times when she had to be pried away from her computer console. Off-duty, she kept mainly to herself, yet often enough, she was seen in the company of Uhura and Christine. Humans, she decided, were an oddity worth observing.

Four months after Lieutenant Larkdow had come aboard, the *Enterprise* found itself in orbit around an unchartered planet, held immobile by a tractor beam from the planet's surface. Sensors scanning the planet revealed a massive force field around it, but little else.

"Any speculations, Mister Spock," asked Kirk, eyeing the mass of reflecting lights on the main screen.

"Unfortunately, Captain, there is no conclusive data," the first officer reported.

"Any theories?"

"Sir," Taz said to Kirk after delivering her report to Spock, "scanners reveal only slight energy readings, but they must be tremendous just to get through the forcefield. In fact, it could be the source of the forcefield itself. We won't know unless we can beam down to the surface."

"And we can't do that unless there's a break in the forcefield," stated the captain.

"Aye," agreed Scott. "In the meantime, I'll

put my men on seeing if we can't break away from the tractor beam that's holding us here."

"Unfortunately every idea I've turned up has flaws." Taz sounded tired.

"Which leaves waiting," Kirk said, turning back to eye balefully the mass on the screen.

"A most logical course of action," said Spock, walking over to the command chair. "Whoever or whatever it is will most likely inform us in their own due time."

"Right," concurred the lieutenant, "after they've decided we've sweated and stewed long enough."

Kirk glanced over at the young officer and reflected that her aloofness was decreasing. Or perhaps the Triyazians weren't as aloof as reported?

"We're holding our own, Captain," reported Sulu in answer to Kirk's question when the captain returned from engineering.

"Spock, is there nothing new?"

"Scanners show the same readings, sir."

"Captain," Uhura reported, "I'm picking up a message."

"Put it on the main screen," commanded Kirk.

"Yes, sir." Uhura's fingers deftly worked her board.

An ominous silence fell over the bridge; the crew stared in horrendous disbelief. Kirk felt his hair bristle at the back of his neck and a chill pass through his body. He stiffened under the onslaught of vile emotions projected from the alien on the screen; an alien with three-pronged ears and red-orange eyes that glowed. He fought for control over his own thoughts as the alien began to speak.

"Welcome to my planet, Chamirah, Captain Kirk. I am Neidom, Lord of the Valley of Nyxstrom," the hideous alien being rasped. "I hope you will enjoy your stay."

"Does that imply that we are to beam planetside?" Kirk asked warily.

"Of course, Captain. That is the reason I am holding your ship. To be sure of your <u>visit</u>," it laughed, as its eyes blazed with red fire. "I await you. Do not disappoint me."

McCoy arrived on the bridge just in time to witness the alien fading from the screen. "Jim, you aren't thinking of going down there, are you?"

"Yes, Captain. It contains the necessary elements; nitrogen, carbon dioxide, methane, water

vapor, hydrogen,..."

"Mister Spock, a simple yes or no will do," interrupted Kirk.

"Yes, sir. The atmosphere is somewhat denser and warmer than that of Earth's, Captain," continued the Vulcan, a brow on the rise. "There is also some unidentified trace elements in the atmosphere. They could be harmful..."

Kirk cut him off. "We have no choice. Check the duty roster and have the appropriate personnel report to the transporter room for landing party detail." Kirk rose from his command chair. "And Spock, you have the conn."

"Captain, may I suggest..." the science officer began.

"Not this time, Spock. I want you running my ship," said Kirk, a faint smile in his eyes thanking the Vulcan.

Spock nodded, and Kirk left the bridge.

James Kirk looked up from his restless pacing to see Williams, Peirson, Omak, and Larkdow enter the transporter room. A frown gathered on his brow. "What are you doing here, Lieutenant Larkdow? You're not scheduled for this detail." His voice was deceptionally mild.

"I have been assigned to the landing detail, \sin ," Taz answered coolly.

"By whom?" Kirk asked quietly.

"Mr. Spock, sir. My field of research should be of some assistance," she reported. $% \begin{center} \begin{ce$

"No," repeated the captain.

"I am fully qualified, sir."

"Indeed, she is, Captain," Spock added, entering the room with the remaining members of the landing detail.

"I'm sure there is someone else in xenosocialogy that is capable of taking her place -- someone with landing party experience," Kirk countered, angry at the position in which he found himself; the position of sending a new recruit to her possible death.

"Capable, yes; better qualified, no," stated the Vulcan.

"Captain, is your objection my qualifications, or the fact that I'm..."

Her words were overridden as the transporter room was suddenly filled with maniacal laughter. "Ah, this is good. Very good, Captain."

The captain stiffened at the sound of the alien's voice. "Let's get this over with," he grunted as Spock moved to stand behind the transporter controls.

"There is one thing," said Spock. "I ran a computer check on Chamirah. It's an ancient Phoenician word meaning 'burning mountain'. A derivative of Chimaera, 'chamira' meant an illusory fancy. In myths the chamira was always composed of a lion, a goat, and a snake. It vomited fire, and it always ravaged the wooded mountains of Nyx, but that could just be coincidence."

"Well, it's no illusion that's holding our ship," Kirk pointed out.

"No, it's not, but what you're walking into could very well be. A being that feeds off fear and...death...." Spock let the statement remain unfinished.

"I'll bear that in mind."

"Neidom is quite real, Captain, but not necessarily in the form we see him," warned Spock.

"Point taken, Spock. Energize," ordered Kirk.

As the landing party materialized on Chamirah's surface, they found themselves surrounded by beings that could have been denizens of hell itself. They were offensive to the sense of sight; their smell was putrid, a mixture of sulfur, ozone and death.

Instinctively they fought the urge to retch, while maintaining a self-defensive circle with their backs to each other.

Then, even as the mutated visions were advancing, they disappeared, leaving only the odor of decay behind. "Fan out. Phasers on stun," ordered Kirk as his eyes scanned their surroundings.

"Where did they go?" asked Omak.

"Perhaps they were never really here," offered Taz, still fighting for control over her rumbling stomach.

"But the smell...!" Omak objected further.

Triyazians could be very expressive when they chose, and Taz chose. The look she sent in Omak's direction could have easily planted him six feet under. Then she clamped a hand over her mouth and quickly made for the nearest boulder.

Recovered, she returned to the others and resumed scanning the area with her tricorder. "No life forms as we know them," she reported, "but I am picking up a high energy reading and another forcefield approximately thirty meters due west."

Kirk turned his attention in the direction she indicated. Nothing. Just black rocks and scorched trees. If indeed, they were trees. "Lieutenant, there is nothing there."

""So it appears, but appearances can be deceptive," Taz reminded him coolly. "There also is some radiation present, but low enough to be safe if we aren't exposed to it for more than 48 hours. There's something else..." She fiddled with the dials in the tricorder. "The ozone layer seems to

have been weakened. It's not filtering out the sun's radiation as it should. That could be harmful, but I can't tell without further tests."

"Any more good news?" snapped Kirk.

"No, sir," she replied. She turned on her heel and started off in the direction of the energy field according to her tricorder readings, leaving the others to follow.

"Captain," Taz called out. Before them a ruined city rose from the rubble of charred rocks and trees.

"Is it real?" asked Kirk motioning the others to stop.

"It's evil," muttered Peirson, suppressing a shudder of panic. $\label{eq:period}$

"How?" asked Kirk, referring to Taz's statement and ignoring Peirson.

"Neidom controls this portion of the planet. We only see what he wants us to see. That's why the shield is up, and why only part of this planet is open to us. He may be as trapped here as we are. I doubt very much if we can contact the *Enterprise*."

Kirk pulled out his communicator to test the lieutenant's theory. "Kirk to *Enterprise*." The only response was static over the open channel.

"We're trapped," stated Williams calmly.

"It appears so," returned Kirk wryly. "Since we can't go back, we had better find the source of that energy field."

"Affirmative," agreed Taz. And with a touch of humor in her voice, she added, "A most logical course of action, Captain. Just because Neidom can't or won't deactivate it doesn't mean we can't."

"Won't...?" questioned Kirk.

"It could also be that Neidom is using the shield to keep the knowledge of his existence secret, a means of protecting his kingdom," explained the lieutenant.

Kirk nodded. Once more they moved forward. As they neared the charred remains of the city, the atmosphere seemed to press in on them; the sensation of being trapped grew stronger with each step they took.

The landing party entered the city's crumbling walls. Taz's attention was drawn by a movement within a shadowed alleyway. Training her tricorder on the subject, she was unaware of a darker shape slinking its way toward her.

Slowly, it inched along until it snaked over her booted foot and wrapped itself around her legs. Taz looked down and couldn't control the whimper of fear that escaped her throat. "Dear God," she cried silently, as she felt the rotting flesh cling to her legs -- almost as if it had managed to seep into the very core of her soul...! Her eyes were caught within the red-orange glow of the creature's, as its cobra-like head raised itself upward. She knew it was an appendage of Neidom's mind -- and she knew he wanted her to know. Even so, she couldn't stop the scream that was building up in her throat.

With lightning quick action, Kirk turned and fired a burst from his phaser. But there was nothing there to hit and the bolt struck the darkened ground to leave a red glow of heat which quickly dissipated.

Shaken, and with a voice that held a slight tremble, Taz murmured, "It was never there...but... the illusion...it was so <u>strong</u>." She shuddered despite herself.

"Are you sure it was an illusion?" asked Kirk.

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes, sir. He wanted me to know it."

Determination showed in the captain's stance. "Shall we..." his voice fell away, as the crumbling city shimmered out of existence, replaced by charred rocky ground that rose to tower above them. At the top stood a medieval-looking castle.

Even though the lieutenant's mind refused to accept the change, she used her tricorder once more. "Fascinating," she remarked aloud, as her mind identified with Terran myths she had become so interested in at the Academy. "Straight out of Pandora's box.... Captain, the energy source appears to be coming from within this mountain."

Suddenly, a tall, lanky humanoid emerged seemingly from the mountain. He moved silently toward the landing party and stopped within a meter of the captain.

"I am Myriddin, servant to Lord Neidom." The voice of the humanoid male was surprisingly soft. He was dressed entirely in black and over his face was a silver alloy face mask which hid everything except his eyes, mouth and jaw.

A line from an Old Earth's Shakespearian classic came to Omak's lips:

"Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

"Where art thou, MacBeth?" he asked aloud.

Kirk shot him a silencing look. "Mr. Myriddin, what is it you want?" he asked as he stared at the humanoid standing before him.

A hideous laugh filled the air around them. "He wants the female, Captain Kirk." Even as the words were spoken, Myriddin moved toward Taz.

Kirk and the others fired their phasers at him, but the beams passed through the humanoid harmlessly. Myriddin bent and picked Taz up as if she were no more than a feather, and together they vanished into the mountainside.

James Kirk ran to the spot where Taz had been the moment before. Nothing. Nothing was there at all. This -- unlike the corrosive snake -- was no illusion. But how could the phaser bolts have passed through the alien without harming him? Or had they? And how had Myriddin managed to carry Taz off? Or were they still there, and all this was just one grand illusion? Question after question and no answers...! "Damn you to hell, Neidom," the *Enterprise* captain swore.

"Ah, Captain, and where do you think we are?" rang Neidom's laughter once more. "As much as I enjoy the additional company, this is between you and me, James Kirk." The other members of the landing detail suddenly vanished.

Kirk's hands clenched into fists. "What did you do with them?" he shouted. $\label{eq:Kirk}$

"To be fair, Captain, I returned them to the *Enterprise*. Now, I suggest you listen carefully. If you <u>want</u> to free your ship, your crew and your female, you will have to defeat me by getting the girl out of here...alive," Neidom explained in a calm, almost gentle tone of voice.

"And if not?" asked Kirk.

"If not...you and your entire crew will remain here forever as my subjects," laughed Neidom savagely. "Don't disappoint me, Captain James T. Kirk."

Neidom's parting words were followed by a lengthy, ominous silence; nothing seemed to exist or even move except Kirk's own torturous thoughts.

Spock answered a call from Transporter Chief Kyle. "Sir. Part of the landing party has just been beamed aboard," he informed the first officer.

"The captain?" asked Spock.

"No, sir. The captain and Lt. Larkdow are still on the planet's surface."

As his words filled the bridge, the crew, as well as Spock, fell into a short, contemplative silence. "Have them report to briefing room three, Mr. Kyle," Spock ordered, then cut the transmission. "Lt. Uhura, have Mr. Scott and Dr. McCoy report there as well."

"Yes, sir," replied Uhura even as the Vulcan left the bridge. $\ensuremath{\,^{\circ}}$

Taz had been dumped quite unceremoniously into an unlit cell. There were no windows, but the odor told her that the walls were damp. With arms outstretched before her, she moved forward until her hands came in contact with one, and discovered that it was covered with wet, slimy, lichen-like growth. Though her eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, Taz could not detect any means of entrance into the room. Hesitantly, she reached out

once again with her hands and shuddered as her fingers sank into the slimy growth. With iron control, she groped her way around the room, but found no trace of a door.

She found a cot on the far side of the room. After carefully inspecting it, she sank down onto the rough mattress and contemplated her situation. She still had no idea as to what was real or illusion and could find no solution to her predicament. "Great galaxy!" she muttered. Taz got up and started to pace.

As she turned for the umpteenth time to retrace her steps to the cot, she stopped, her body stiffening. For in place of the cot was the biggest, ugliest spider in the galaxy. It sat on the cold stone floor staring at her from its red-orange eyes. "Do you not like my appearance, Taz Larkdow?" It spoke in strange sucking sounds.

Taz fought back a scream, took a step backward, and found her back pressed up against the slimy walls.

Eyes wide open in fear, she watched as the spider started walking toward her on its eight hairy legs. With its strange sucking voice it spoke once more. "That is not the way to greet your host. Does Starfleet not teach you anything?"

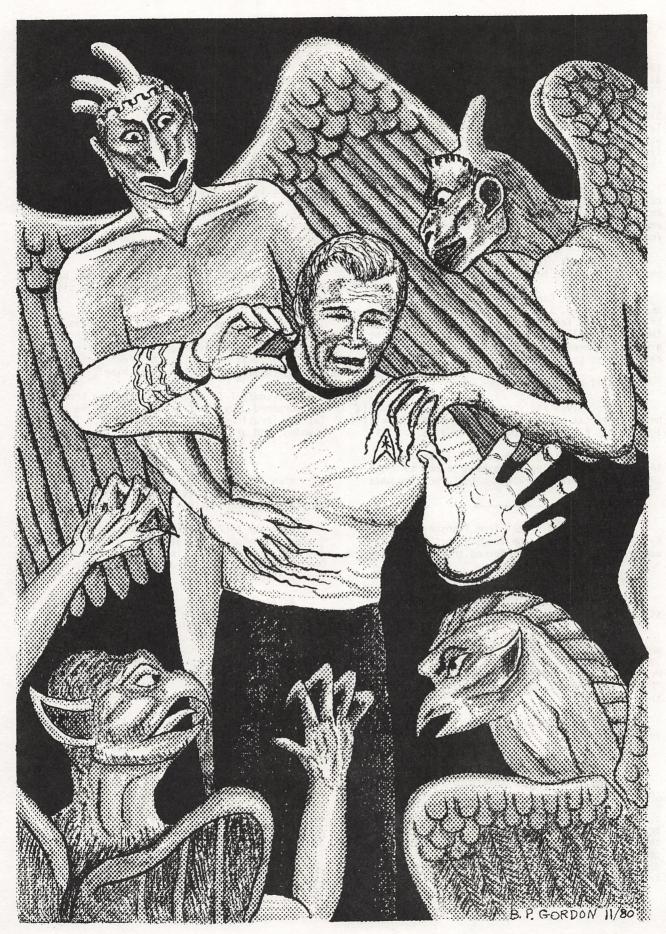
The control Taz had maintained now broke, and she screamed. By the time one leg had reached her, Taz was irrational with fear and falling into the opening void of unconsciousness.

When Taz awoke she found herself once more resting on the cot. Recalling what had happened, she sprang from it with a cry of dismay.

With the back of her hand pressed tightly against her mouth, she watched helplessly as the bed and the wall behind it slowly dissolved into a shimmering screen on which she saw her captain walking into a trap....

As Kirk climbed the mountainside he lost his hold and fell back a few meters, but he suffered only small cuts and abrasions; he resumed climbing. Finally he reached the cave entrance. He stood there a moment, bent double, his hands resting on his thighs, breathing deeply. He entered the cave and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. In front of him were a group of beings that resembled gargoyles: grotesque, demonical figures, with bodies of men, though covered with a mixture of fur and feathers and large grotesque wings. They had heads of demon eagles, eyes that glowed yellow in the dark, and claws with long glistening talons for hands.

The beasts fell upon him, clawing at him, ripping his uniform and tearing gashes in his flesh. Silent tear tracks formed on Taz's cheeks as she watched Kirk fight free, reaching for his fallen phaser and firing at the beasts, stunning some and scattering the remaining few. Then slowly, painfully, and with his strength gone, he slipped down onto the bloodied stone cavern floor and lost consciousness, his life blood draining from his torn



body.

"Ohmigod," Taz cried as the wall reappeared, along with Neidom. This time she didn't cringe, her near-panic state over the captain's well being overriding her fear.

Her golden eyes -- flecked with brown -- were almost bronze when they met the red glow of Neidom's. "I'm getting out of here!"

"Indeed," mocked the evil voice. "Just how do you propose to do this?"

"This world of yours is illusion," she challenged. "I'll get out of here if I have to slay the mythical dragon!"

"So be it," echoed the evil voice. And where Neidom had stood, a dragon appeared, bellowing fire and flame.

Taz dived under the blast of heat, scraping her skin on the uneven floor. With calculated sarcasm she muttered. "With my bare hands no less. Least you could do is supply the sword."

Even as the words were spoken, a sword appeared in her right hand. The dragon and the far wall disappeared, leaving behind a darkened gap in its place.

Cautiously, the lieutenant got up off the floor. She tested the sword with a few slashes through the air. *It's better than nothing*, she told herself as she limped over to the beckoning space. She tested it with the sword to be sure it was as it seemed. It was.

Taz was limping slightly as she moved down the damp tunnel. Suddenly Myriddin walked through the stone wall before her, blocking her way. Her sword was up in a flash, held before him at a wicked angle. His gentle brown eyes watched her from out of his masked face. "So it has come to that. The proprophecy has come to be enfolded around us. The gold against the fire."

Still holding the sword ready, Taz asked, "What are you talking about?" $\,$

"You are the gold, the good. Neidom is the fire, the evil," Myriddin's soft voice explained.

"How did I qualify for the role of the gold?" she asked, puzzled.

"Your eyes," he answered. Taz nodded, understanding. "You and your captain have been caught within our ancient prophecy. Now you must act out your roles accordingly."

"And whose side are you on?"

"Gold's," he replied.

"Then will you help me locate Captain Kirk? Do you know where he is?" $\,$

"I know, but I cannot help you."

"What!" Taz exploded.

"That is what Neidom wants. \underline{You} must overcome him. Your best chance to do that \overline{is} by surprise, and therefore I cannot assist you," Myriddin informed her.

"If you know where Kirk is, please, take me to him. Let me worry about Neidom." Still Myriddin stood firm.

She lowered the sword, took a step forward, and laid a slender pale hand on Myriddin's black-clad arm. She watched as bewilderment flashed across his eyes, even as his mouth twisted into a caricature of a smile.

Hesitantly, he laid a black gloved hand over hers. No normal human had ever touched him with kindness, not by choice after what Neidom had done to him. "I will do what I can."

Taz smiled a rare smile at him, friendship glowing in the depths of her eyes.

James Kirk moaned softly and opened his painfilled eyes. He was alone in the cavern. Of the beasts that had attacked him, nothing remained. Slowly he inched his way over to the cavern wall until his back rested against its coolness. As he felt some of his strength return, he carefully tottered to his feet. Then with his hand on the rock walls he continued forward.

Staggering, Kirk moved in the direction of the demonical laughter that had begun without warning. Slowly he approached the source.

Before him stood a dragon eyeing him with baleful red-orange eyes. And as he stood before it, he felt his arm as if in slow motion, rise and take aim with his phaser.

"Now, James Kirk, you will die." Neidom's voice issued forth from the dragon's mouth, followed closely by a torch of flame which licked the tattered remains of Kirk's golden shirt. He cried out in pain, and dropped to the stone floor. He twisted in pain until a black void reached out, leaving him unaware of Taz's entrance.

With an outraged cry, the lieutenant raised her sword and moved toward the dragon. The beast turned on her, bellowing forth flame as it advanced.

As it came within reach, Taz dived below the flame and rolled herself underneath the great creature. She shoved the sword under its great belly, then rolled out from under quickly. The tunnel filled with bloodcurdling screams as the dragon crashed to the stone floor. Taz scrambled to her feet.

Myriddin pulled the captain to safety. Kirk blinked and stared first into the alien's masked face and at the battle going on. "Lieutenant," moaned Kirk.

"Quiet," Myriddin said. "Don't distract her. Where's your phaser?" he added, holding out a gloved



hand. He could see the battle going on in the captain's eyes.

"Trust me. Can you get up?" Kirk nodded, then pointed to where he had dropped the phaser. "Good, let me help you." Getting Kirk to his feet, Myriddin's gentle voice asked, "Will you be able to pull her out of the way when I fire?"

"Yes," Kirk whispered weakly as Myriddin retrieved the weapon.

As the dragon transformed itself back into Neidom, Taz staggered away, leaving the bloodied sword in his neck. Neidom hissed a vile stench of black smoke in her direction, making her gag with each breath she took. Kirk pulled her away from the smoke. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Myriddin fire at Neidom. Then suddenly they were outside the cavern once more, stumbling down the mountainside.

Chekov studied the scanners. "Commander," he reported, "the field is weakening."

"Aye, sir, but we may pull apart," replied Scott, even as Spock returned his attention to the screen before him.

The *Enterprise* moaned under the strain of the additional power surge against the tractor beam. Then it was free, sending the crew sprawling in all directions. The shield continued to weaken as Scott kept up the barrage. It gave way after a few more bursts, leaving a gaping hole in the forcefield surrounding the planet.

"Lt. Uhura, have Doctor McCoy and a security detail report to the transporter room. Lt. Sulu, you have the conn." Spock left the bridge.

Taz breathed in the stale yet somehow sweet tasting air of the planet's surface. Very slowly, she turned onto her side and checked on the captain's condition. Her hand fluttered over his burnt chest. Blisters were already forming -- made worse still by the oozing tears in his flesh. "Oh, Captain..." she murmured, wishing there was something she could do.

Kirk moaned slightly. Slowly he opened his eyes, and found himself looking into the concerned face of the Triyazian. "Lieutenant, are you all right? What happened?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

Taz smiled and attempted to jest. "I'm okay, sir. Do you want the cut down version, or the blow by blow account? Either way, sir, you came off worse."

"No doubt we both look like we've been through a war and lost. Now what happened?" he asked wincing as he moved to sit up.

"I burnt my arm, courtesy of Neidom," she replied, gently pushing him back down. "Rest, sir. We're not out of this yet." She stood up and scanned their surroundings. Quickly she pinpointed the way they had come. Kirk interrupted her thoughts. "Lieutenant, I'm not sure I can move. You'll manage better on your own, cover more ground. You can bring back help...."

Taz leveled her golden eyes on him. "And just where would I be going, Captain? To your quaint human custom of a Sunday social? No, if we go anywhere, we go together."

"I could make that an order, Lieutenant."

Taz looked him straight in the eye -- Triyazians could be stubborn too. "Since you're in no shape to enforce it, Captain, I'll do as I please."

"You're on report, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Duly noted." She helped Kirk to his feet. "Okay?" $\,$

"I won't argue," conceded Kirk.

"Well, galaxy be blessed! Will wonders never cease!" exclaimed Taz, returning the captain's dry look. Together they moved off slowly, Taz keeping an arm around his waist to help support him. After a couple of steps, he stumbled. "I'm sorry, Captain."

"It's all right." He leaned against her slight frame, unable to support his own weight. Kirk glanced over at the girl, but Taz didn't notice. Her concentration was on some obscure mark ahead of them, intent only on getting them both to safety. But the exertion had taken its toll and when, a few minutes later, Kirk passed out, the additional weight buckled Taz's bad leg. Together they fell to the ground.

Taz rose to her knees slowly, shakily. She checked on Kirk, a worried frown playing over her brow. She couldn't carry him. Now she would have to go on alone if she were to get help for him.

Just when Taz Larkdow thought she could go no further, she saw the shimmer of a transporter. Momentarily, she wondered if it were an illusion, then Spock and McCoy took form. With relief she led the Vulcan and the doctor back up the mountain to the stricken Kirk.

 $\ensuremath{\mathsf{McCoy}},$ by the lieutenant's side, pressed a hypospray against her arm.

"Never mind me. The captain needs you," Taz said as they came within sight of the still, unmoving body of James Kirk. Watching McCoy, she asked, "Will he be all right?"

"He'd have been a lot better if he'd never set foot here, but he'll survive," grumbled the doctor as he ran a scanner over the unconscious body of the captain.

Taz turned and eyed the distance she had just

covered, suddenly aware of the ache in her bones. She wished McCoy's spray would quickly take effect.

Silently, the lieutenant left the others, retracing her steps once again. Taz was not about to leave without trying to return Myriddin's help.

Taz neared the spot where she and Kirk had emerged through what she had come to think of as a 'continuum' door. While a theory of the planet's past fermented in her mind, she continued to cover the distance. She was certain this place was a detention center for the forbidden, the malformed; but why and how she had no idea.

Neidom was a master of illusion, but how? By natural circumstances -- such as genetic arrangement -- or by a transferral of physical energies? And if Myriddin were the average inhabitant, why was he here? a prisoner made to serve Neidom? a pawn in a greater game? The questions were endless.

Taz paused, then let herself slip down to the ground. Resting her hands on her knees, she leaned forward in an attempt to recapture her breath. In the time she rested, Spock had caught up with her.

"You could have waited," the Vulcan's deep voice spoke in a quiet reprimand.

Taz jumped to her feet and spun around. She would have stumbled if Spock had not steadied her. "Commander," her voice almost an accusation, "what are you doing here?"

"You are a valuable member of Starfleet, and as such..." Taz held up her hand in defeat, interrupting Spock's flow of logic.

"All right, Commander. I understand." She took stock of their position. "I find myself rather glad you're here, sir."

"Who's Myriddin?" asked Spock, changing the subject.

"A fellow being in need, Commander," answered the lieutenant as she headed toward the gateway door. "Let's hope we're in time."

Though Myriddin's disbelief in Neidom's illusions had weakened the Lord of Nyxstrom, he was far from defeated, and when Spock and Taz appeared through the continuum door, he seemed almost pleased. He looked up, his red-orange eyes studying them. He had reassumed his warlord shape —that of a large humanoid, dressed in a jumpsuit of burgundy. His three-pronged ears showed through the fall of long greyish-black hair, and from his mouth ran a sliver of green-yellow spittle.

There was a look of gloating in his eyes as he surveyed the two Starfleet officers. With a throttle grip about Myriddin's neck, he first continued to press his advantage, then seemed to change his mind and pushed him away. "Myriddin, you will know the truth. The woman is not the gold to defeat the fire; neither is the captain. She will spurn you

as others have, with one look upon your face." Neidom's evil voice rang out the prophecy of doom.

"Your judgment rings false, Neidom; you are a false lord. No one attacks with impunity," Taz countered.

Myriddin backed away from Neidom, keeping one hand against the rock wall to steady himself. He would not turn to face Taz and Spock.

"It is not I who rings false. You tell lies with words of gold," Neidom hissed.

"Words of gold," repeated Taz, sadly shaking her head. "Myriddin, he is correct in only one assumption; neither Captain Kirk nor I can defeat him truly. That rests with you and you alone." Taz's words rang forth with truth, but still Myriddin refused to face her.

"You are a stubborn man, Myriddin. Will you not turn and face me?" There was a twinge of impatience in the lieutenant's voice.

"No," answered Myriddin.

The gold against the fire. Myriddin still did not completely understand, but, bracing himself, he turned to face them, his face mask gone.

Taz made a careful study of the scars and healed-over pores of infection along Myriddin's cheekbones, the lumps on what should have been a smooth forehead. Her hands reached up and lightly touched his face. Spock's brows rose as he watched her gently touch a fresh cut over a healed pore of past infection.

"You are hurt. Will you come back with us?" questioned Taz.

"Neidom will not allow it," he answered sadly.

"You are wrong, my friend. Look at him. Already his powers are dwindling; soon he will be no more than a wisp of smoke. What made him powerful was the fear he cast within your soul. You hold the power to set free the denizens of Chimirah. Free to walk in the light once more."

They watched in silence as Neidom metamorphosed one more time, becoming a small insignificant creature. Nonetheless, evil still shone in his eyes; his voice, when he spoke, was weak yet contemptuous. "So you win, you irritants of space. But I shall not be defeated! We will meet again." He coughed and shrank still more in size. "You can defeat me but never destroy me...."

"Come with us," Taz repeated over Neidom's gloating.

Myriddin nodded assent and they turned to leave as they had entered. Behind them, they heard the bloodcurling cry of the Lord of Nyxstrom once, and then no more....

Onboard the *Enterprise* Spock and the lieutenant took Myriddin down to sickbay. McCoy was waiting for them. "About time you got here!" he grumbled as they entered.

Spock eyed the doctor with a hint of distaste. "Doctor McCoy, you have your patients now. I suggest you see to their needs." The Vulcan started to move to where the captain was resting on one of the beds.

McCoy shook his head at Spock's retreating back. "Vulcans," he muttered, before turning to the lieutenant and Myriddin. "What happened?" he asked.

"For this time -- good triumphed over evil," supplied the lieutenant, as she seated herself on one of the beds.

McCoy reached for a hypo, set it for a mild sedative and pressed it against her arm. "Lie down and rest now," he instructed before turning his attention on Myriddin.

As McCoy studied the facial scars, Taz said, "It's okay, Myriddin." He relaxed then, back against the cushion of the bed. McCoy ran his scanner over him, then set the hypo accordingly. "How did all this happen?" questioned the doctor.

"Neidom," answered Myriddin, his voice reluctant.

 $\ensuremath{\,^{\text{McCoy}}}$ took the hint. "Okay. You just rest now."

Hours later, Taz quietly slipped off her bed in sickbay and moved to stand beside the doctor who was running a scanner over Kirk. "How is he?" she asked.

"Fine," returned McCoy, with a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

"And Myriddin?" she asked further, glancing over at the still sleeping form opposite the captain's bed.

"After surgery he'll be fine physically...but I'm not sure what his mental outlook will be."

"He'll be okay, Doctor," said Taz, and there was something in her voice that almost convinced the doctor.

"I believe that Myriddin has got himself a champion there," remarked Kirk, drawing the lieutenant's attention. But her only response was a brief nod. "When do I get out of here, Bones?"

"What? You tired of me already?" replied the doctor.

Kirk sighed. "I've got a ship to run."

"I know, Jim, and at the moment Spock is handling it just fine," McCoy assured him.

The captain sighed again, but said nothing.

McCoy turned back to the lieutenant. "You may as well report back to duty, Lieutenant. Perhaps," he went on, "you'd like to come back here later and see our guest to his temporary quarters."

"Yes, sir," Taz acknowledged with a visual lightening of her mood.

Taz reported to her science station and put a call through to the bridge. "Anything new?" she asked of Chekov who was monitoring Spock's station.

"The power source is gone," he told her. "There was a blip on the long range scanners, but it was gone before we could get a fix on it."

"Any trace of Neidom?"

"None," he replied.

"How goes it?" asked Taz the next day as she entered Myriddin's quarters, interrupting a conversation between him and Spock. "Oh, excuse me, Commander. I didn't realize you were here."

Spock nodded, dismissing the intrusion. "You seem quite pleased," he observed, noticing the lieutenant's smile.

"I am," she replied. "My report's almost finished, but I need just a couple of answers from Myriddin." Taz turned to him. "Can you help us fill in the blank spots? For example: the prophecy of the gold against the fire."

"Yes," answered the gentle voiced Myriddin. The lesser scars erased with surgery, while the deeper ones showed pink and puffy against the paleness of his facial color. The pores of infection had been cleansed, and for the most part were on the verge of disappearing. The lumps on his forehead were due to be removed by surgery the next ship's day.

"Many centuries past, our culture was highly advanced. It was recorded by our scientists that a bright fire fell from the heavens and landed in the Valley of Nyxstrom, then a beautiful, lush paradise. Shortly thereafter a stranger with beguiling ways appeared amongst the people, and with their help, he constructed the castle on the mountain's rise."

Taz was staring transfixed at him. "There is something I don't understand. No, I take that back, I think I do after all."

As she paused, Myriddin said, "I think that you do." There was warmth in his eyes.

"Go on, Lieutenant," urged the Vulcan.

"Myriddin, is Neidom that stranger?" Taz questioned. "We have systematically scanned the planet. None of the scans have shown any evidence of other inhabitants with his capabilities."

"Neidom is the only one," confirmed Myriddin.
"As far back as I can remember, he has always been."

"I see," nodded Taz. "Why were you there?"

"Once the castle was built, Neidom had no further use of the people. He began to experiment on them, coming into the villages by night and making off with the children. My people were terrified. They strove to construct an energy field across the valley -- to stop his midnight raids. To a certain extent they were successful; the raids stopped. But in return Neidom created an energy shield which surrounded the planet, cutting off our sun's rays. He offered us a grim choice: eventual death of our species, or...the continuation of his experiments," explained Myriddin, his voice devoid of all nuances. It was as if her was speaking of ancient history -- not of something that had happened to him.

"The power source within the mountain is no longer there," said Spock. "Nor have our scans shown any trace of Neidom."

"Then we did defeat him..." There was a wonder, as well as hope, in Myriddin's words.

"You," corrected Taz, her eyes meeting his.
"We picked up a long range blip leaving this space sector..."

When she paused, Spock prompted, "I take it you have a theory, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir.... Perhaps Neidom had been sent there as a test, from some other world -- maybe even a different dimension -- to see if colonization was feasible. But he has failed. Now he's been called back and all traces of his existence removed, leaving us only with speculation, but no evidence."

Kirk, no longer confined to sickbay, had arrived in time to hear the last. "But why the tractor beam against the ship?" he asked.

The lieutenant glanced over at Spock. At his nod, she continued. "Once a ship became trapped within the tractor beam, it would be unable to report back to Starfleet or whomever for further exploration of the situation. Also Neidom might have acquired a taste for new guinea pigs."

"It's possible," agreed the captain, taking the remaining empty seat.

"There's still something I don't understand; why could only I defeat Neidom?" Myriddin asked.

"Lieutenant Larkdow can explain that," Spock replied.

"The gold, meaning the good," Taz told him,
"were to return to defeat the fire, the evil." She
paused. Myriddin nodded. "Over the centuries the
gold changed from representing the sky to that
which shines bright with golden color. Like gold
hair, eyes. But the real gold remains within the
souls; that's why you defeated Neidom. You had
faith in what was right, and chose to save others
at the risk of your own life."

Myriddin's eyes sought Taz's. "Why didn't you turn away? I know I repulse people. No one has ever touched me the way you did. Why?"

Taz smiled. "Some people only see what is before them, while others look deeper, past the surface to what lies within the soul."

"There's an Old Earth saying: 'appearances can be deceiving'," added Kirk.

"Most appropriate, Captain," concurred the Vul-

"Glad you agree." A teasing light appeared in Kirk's eyes as they met the Vulcan's. He looked from Spock to Myriddin. "Gentlemen, if you will excuse the lieutenant and me. Taz...?" He stood aside as she rose from her chair, and indicated that she should precede him. She did so, with a question in her eyes.

"You'll find out," replied Kirk as they left. He led her to a briefing room.

"...and Myriddin is going to need some help putting the culture back on its feet again. It will be some time before the Federation will be able to set up a task force. Which leaves me with the decision of picking the right crew member to assist him until then." The captain paused before asking, "Any suggestions?"

Taz took the cue. "May I volunteer, Captain?"

"You were the one I had in mind, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir."

Taz smiled as Spock prepared to beam back to the *Enterprise*. "Commander, peaceful journeys."

 $\mbox{\sc He}$ nodded. "Live long and prosper, Miss Larkdow. Myriddin."

And as the shimmer started, Myriddin raised a black gloved hand in farewell.

Draconian Graffiti: (by Sheryl Adsit)

Princess Ardala will do anything for a buck!

CREATURES OF THE DARK SIDE

illustrations and descriptions by

Amy Falkowitz

DREFON DINLEA: "Seeker-hunter," or more correctly, Imperial Espionage Specialist. A small ornithoid species native to Wyenrok, they are capable of "going native" on almost any world with a non-sentient ornithoid species. The Empire finds them useful as spies since they can blend in with harmless ornithoids and also have the abilities of most meat-eating ornithoids: flight, living on the land, exposure endurance, etc. They are also of a high level of intelligence, which means they can assess situations and make decisions on their own.

They have a speech which is generated at near ultra-sonic levels at high speed (info-burst style, similar to some computer-based communications systems). Since this means they cannot be heard (or interpreted) by most humanoids, the Dinlea wear a vocoder-translator to overcome this problem.

SYERNAC OYJÉ: A pseudo-reptilian species, possibly related to the ancient Falkoi Dragon-Jedi (see the portfolio "Creatures of the Force" in Twin Suns II). They are sworn to the Dark Side. They serve the Empire (and may have been genetically engineered by same), and specifically the Emperor. (It is rumored that the Emperor's true personal guard -- the ones only seen when and if the Emperor's person is directly threatened -- are entirely Syernac Oyjéi.) They are powerful Force-users, though not Jedi; they are trained in certain disciplines that the Jedi abhor and indeed, teach against.

Tall, lightly scaled, winged; they have the natural weapons of fangs and claws which they will readily use, especially if driven to a killing frenzy (apparently an easy thing to do). However, their weapon-of-choice is the light-lance, a distant relative of the more elegant Jedi lightsaber.

DALVERSNAGMA: Colloquially known as "scramblers," these semi-intelligent hexapodal creatures are favored by Imperial Jedi-huhting patrols. They are capable of great physical agility, using their limbs to climb upon, scramble over, and cling to almost any surface or obstacle. They can also glide for short distances; they sometimes employ a parachute technique to drop upon unsuspecting prey, and then enwrap that prey with the tough membranes between their limbs.

The upper body, limbs, and feet are covered in a dense, coarse fur; six eyes are spaced evenly around the central dorsal surface. Between the joining point of one limb and the next are the

energy manipulation organs in the form of small tendrils; Dalversnagma are primarily energy-eaters. However, they also consume well masticated protein; this is accomplished with the ventral mouth, which is a circular surface coated with small, extremely sharp and strong grinding teeth, and suction pores (not illustrated).

Called "scramblers" for their ability to disrupt energy flows, Imperials utilize them in groups of two or three. Acting in concert, they will attack a Jedi (they are attracted to Jedi and other Force-users by the "clarity" of the energy-flow), disrupting his control of the Force, then knocking out his nervous system, causing unconsciousness. At this point, they will enwrap their prey, using their entire .8 meter diameter bodies...and feed. Their homeworld is unknown.

ANYICTHEVI IMURASA: The Anyicthevi are the native sentient species of Nasjanni. The culture is very class-conscious, dominated by the Imurasa or Warlords. Some of these warlords, and the warriors under their command, have been trained in disciplines similar to those utilized by the Jedi; they are Force sensitives to some extent.

The Empire quickly absorbed them within its own ranking system, persuading the most powerful of the Imurasa that there were more worlds than their own that they could rule. Though they disdain the use of energy-weapons, they are strong-willed and brilliant strategists and warriors. The Empire has found them useful on more primitive worlds where high-tech is not needed, but a strong, well-organized occupation force is.

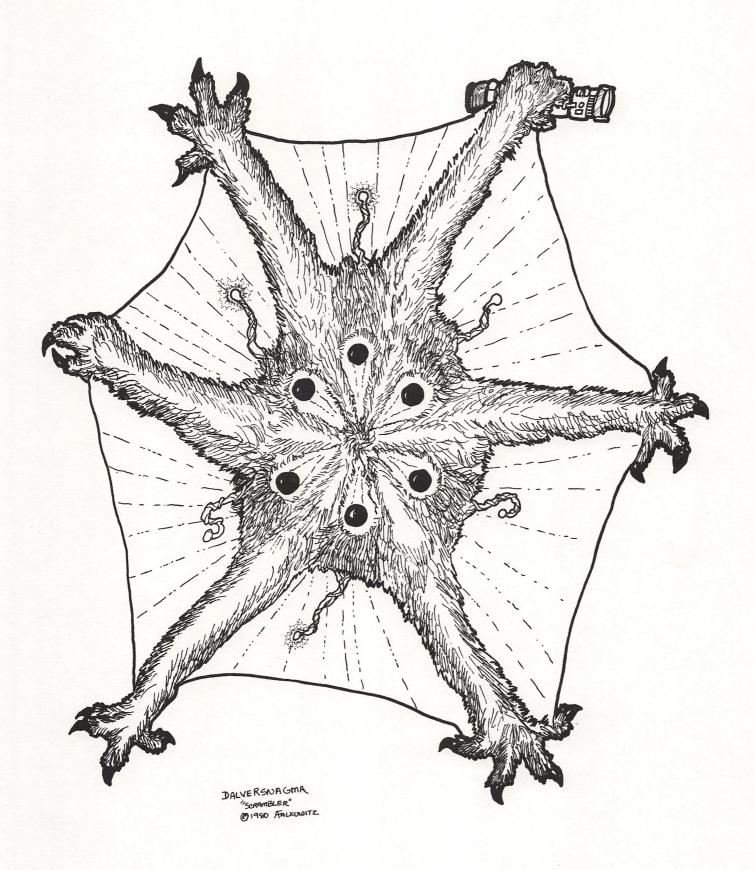
GREGETSAO TIAN: The Gregetsao are an elite cult of Darkside manipulators, pseudo-felinoid in body, mysterious and generally anti-social in nature. They are not Jedi, but sorcerors, or more correctly, sorceresses (all those known are female). Each individual wears an elaborate robe of her own structuring, not of cloth or hide, but rather of a pseudo-matter, woven of energy. It is a personal signature, a symbol of self. Though not acknowledging the Empire's supremacy, the Gregetsao's activities and manipulations of dark powers can only help the Empire. Theye are several worlds where the Gregetsao operate, playing puppet-masters and powers-behind-the-throne within the native society. Since there are very few Gregetsao in existence, and those few seldom if ever congregate to pool their powers, the Empire does not interfere with them; they pose no direct threat.

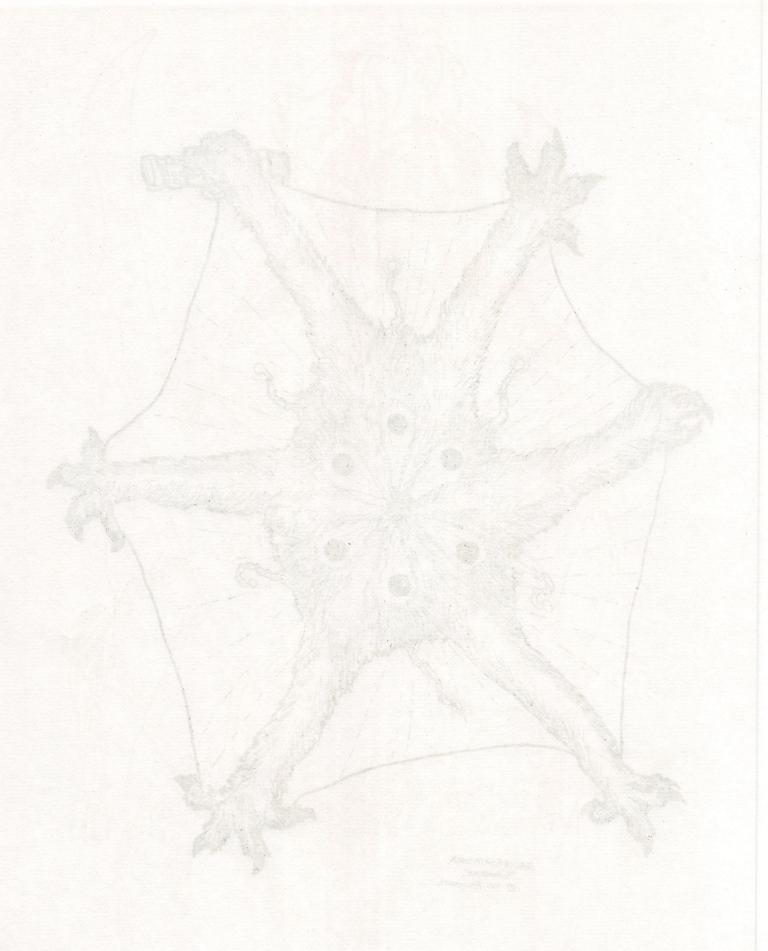




















the extraoroinary oiscretion affair

susan R. matthews

Napoleon Solo sat alone in the darkened room and nursed a stiff drink thankfully.

It had been a close thing -- too close. Given the state of international affairs since that regrettable incident in Iran, the <u>last</u> thing they needed was another incident -- in yet another Muslim country. The American officer -- well, he'd been foolish, although he probably hadn't been briefed properly. It happened all the time -- wellmeaning diplomats saying the wrong thing at the wrong time -- usually resulting in a hasty extraction and mutual sighs of relief from both governments. Of course regrettable things did happen: Napoleon remembered a friend of his, stationed to the diplomatic mission in New Delhi some years back, whose daughter had been beaten and killed by some self-righteous construction worker who objected to the immodesty of her skirts. That had been rough, too. This time -- well, this time they'd pulled it out of the fire. Napoleon had been golfing with his friend when the soldiers invaded the golf course, threatened to kill them both for being American spies; yes, he had first-hand knowledge of how ugly the situation could have gotten. Napoleon -thanks to his years of experience -- had been able to stall, extemporize; but even he had been getting close to the edge of his rope when Illya'd shown up.

Seeing Illya had been a surprise. Even after all the years they'd been partners, all the years of having Illya pop up in the strangest places at just the right time, this latest rescue startled Napoleon. Probably because they hadn't really worked together since Mr. Waverley had died. Napoleon was going to have to ask Illya how it was he'd

known to come out to the golf course to find Napoleon -- what Illya was doing in Kabul in the first place, for that matter. And why their captors had responded so readily to him -- his instructions -- when they'd been ignoring Napoleon's best efforts.
Napoleon shook his head in fond congratulatory amusement. Leave it to Illya. Never any telling what Illya was going to come up with next. It would probably make good telling, how Illya had come to be on top of the situation. And he hadn't had a chance to talk with Illya for such a long time.

It had been five years and more now since Mr. Waverley, their former chief, had died -- suddenly, at his desk, victim of a heart attack. It had come as an unpleasant shock to the whole organization. Although Napoleon had been tagged years past as Waverley's successor, no one -- least of all Mr.
Waverley himself, apparently -- had expected the
death of the Director so soon. Napoleon could still see Mr. Waverley's face, just after the body had been discovered, before the undertaker had taken over -- the expression of surprise, of profound unwillingness... Mr. Waverley's death had come at a particularly bad time, too, just as they finally chanced on what they believed to be the crucial operation they needed to complete successfully, above all quietly, in order to begin the final and total eradication of the Technical Hierarchy forever. To have their number one enforcement agent kicked upstairs at this truly crucial moment had hurt. For a while -- several very bad days -- it had seemed as if they would lose their chance, lose the moment. Napoleon smiled at the memory. Illya had come through on that one, too. Oh, not that Illya had ever not come through when his intervention was

required -- but, it seemed to Napoleon, Mr. Waverley had never quite trusted Illya as much as he had Napoleon. Even Mr. Waverley would have had to be proud of Illya for the way he handled Enforcement for Napoleon. He seemed to reveal a whole new range of talents, showed himself more truly adaptable than Napoleon had ever expected Illya to be; fit himself into the style of leadership that Enforcement expected, seasoned his persona with enough of his own personality quirks (quite as famous in their own way as Napoleon's) to make the new regime both palatable and interesting -- in short, had forced himself to become almost charismatic, as the situation demanded. Napoleon had been truly surprised at Illya's resources. But then Mr. Waverley -- Napoleon felt -- had always undervalued the quietly competent agent. Napoleon could remember his conversations with Mr. Waverley about Illya. Mr. Waverley had been so -- ungratefully reluctant to sign over the reins of Enforcement to Illya in the same way as the reins of the directorship were being made over to Napoleon. It always seemed to come down to the one basic fact --Mr. Waverley would smile somberly, and remind Napoleon -- that 'Mr. Kuryakin is, after all, Russian'. This evidence of their chief's narrow-mindedness had always distressed Napoleon, especially as Mr. Waverley's 'warnings' to Napoleon about Illya's nationality seemed to increase in frequency and urgency as the years passed. Napoleon supposed that it was the one blind spot in Mr. Waverley's otherwise cosmopolitan outlook -- the one ugly remnant of ethnocentricity in his otherwise urbane makeup. Napoleon knew how long it had taken him, himself, to truly 'forget' that Illya was Russian by birth. But once Napoleon had finally succeeded in accepting Illya on Illya's own terms, he had never again doubted the Russian agent; and his memories of the myriad petty tests he'd set for Illya in the earlier years of their partnership embarrassed him deeply. Napoleon knew that -- conceal it as he would -- Illya would have been wounded if he'd come to know Mr. Waverley's lack of faith in him. Illya for all his pose of Slavic imperturbability was inclined to take these things to heart; he was, after all, a very passionate man, a man of deep and profound loyalties that -- once made, once accepted -- could not then be changed by any external force that Napoleon could imagine. As a matter of fact, Illya's ferocious loyalties, his single-minded devotion to his ideals, could be rather frightening to less decided minds -- and indeed could be subject to misinterpretation. Misinterpreted Illya had been, sometimes with admirable ingenuity. Illya didn't talk much? Well, he was obviously a man with a guilty conscience, with something to hide; a war criminal, a spy. Which latter accusation was really rather humorous, considering the fact that they all were UNCLE agents. Illya was feeling communicative? Obviously pumping his coworkers for information. Illya's odd sense of humor had contributed materially to the problem; it was a truism that Kuryakin was tempermentally incapable of accounting for his origins in the same way twice. There were people within the organization -- administrative people, with nothing better to do for excitement -- who'd spent most of their spare office time comparing, collating Kuryakin notes, and deriving tally-sheets listing seventeen different cities of birth, at least twenty brothers and sisters, eight or nine twins, thirty-four versions of what Illya's father had done for a living.

Napoleon, of course, was duty-bound to officially disapprove of all of these speculations. But he knew -- being an honest man -- that he was as interested, as curious, as the rest; and he knew also that he, himself, closer to Illya both personally and professionally than anyone he knew of, knew as much and as little of Illya's actual antecedents as any of the mailroom dayworkers trading their Kuryakin stories. Even Illya's personal files, his classified UNCLE paperwork, that Napoleon had never seen until Mr. Waverley was dead, said nothing. Nothing, that is, that Illya had not already told Napoleon, and six different ways. Illya's careless promiscuity with such story-telling was proof enough to Napoleon that Illya's purpose was not deception, or even a pretense at decpetion, but Illya's fierce guarding of his privacy. And it had worked, too.

Ah, but Napoleon had consulted Illya's files for another reason; he really had to laugh at him-self, remembering. It was a token of that same impenetrable reticence that even Napoleon -- after all these years; he'd known Illya since 1959 -- had not known, had not been sure, of something as basic as Illya's sexuality. Oh, he knew well enough that Illya could be attracted to women, had occasional evidence of Illya's actual relations with women. Illya did patronize the occasional house of easy virtue, for instance. But he'd always seemed uncomfortable about it; he didn't take well to the man-to-man teasing so much a part of masculine friendships, from Napoleon's point of view. Even during the most florid sexual revolution years, Illya had remained by all evidence shy of sex, reluctant to engage in sexual relations, and even ashamed of himself, disgusted with himself when he did. Twenty years and more, and Napoleon had never known Illya to develop a true sexual relationship with any woman. He had female friends, but none that he slept with. Indeed, Illya's primary human relationship -- his only human relationship, when it came down to that -- had been with Napoleon himself; and there the strength of his attachment, and Illya's renowned abstemiousness that amounted almost to celibacy, had given rise to one of the most interesting, as well as most pervasive, rumors: that Illya loved Napoleon, that Illya was gay. Napoleon knew that this rumor was, in fact, still making the rounds. He could afford to laugh at it now, but there had been a time when he'd been seriously worried about his friend. Napoleon was not homophobic; he had long since gained the sexual maturity required to ensure that the homosexuality of a friend was no threat to him. He had been concerned for Illya, more deeply as the years passed, in case it were true, for Napoleon knew that for all his mature tolerance, he himself -- Napoleon Solo -- was totally dedicated to his own heterosexual persuasion. So that if Illya were in love with him -- if Illya's sexual focus were centered around Napoleon -- Napoleon was doomed by the very nature of the problem to be a source of pain to his friend. That Napoleon did not want; he had even brought himself to the self-sacrificial point of imagining the possibility of sexual relations with Illya, usually in some impossibly desperate circumstances. But there was really no help for it; he couldn't alter his own sexual orientation to match that of a samesex lover...and the whole question was totally absurd anyway, because it presumed Illya's homosexuality, and Illya was surely not homosexual. Was he? The signs were all there -- even down to the true nature of

the apparently fascinating challenge he presented to women.

In the end Napoleon had made up his mind to consult the personnel files, to read through Illya's psychological profiles. He excused it to himself as a necessary invasion of Illya's privacy -- but by this time Napoleon was director, Illya his righthand-man for all that Illya was left-handed, and there could be no hesitancy based on personal misunderstanding between Director and his Chief Enforcement Agent. It was a good excuse, but Napoleon still felt quilty; and the more so because Illya's personal profiles were so strongly, so profoundly heterosexual. He was abstemious, yes; the records noted that he repressed his sexuality sternly. All indications were that his feelings about women had been critically complicated by either the traumatic death of a wife, or his equally traumatic desertion of some passionately loved woman. It was just as bad either way, as far as Napoleon was concerned. His investigation into Illya's very private, very painful emotional history left him feeling as ashamed, as soiled, as if he'd been spying on Illya's solitude. Well. It had been done, it was over. Napoleon hadn't seen that much of Illya in the ensuing years, after all; Enforcement ran itself, and he rarely needed to do more than see Illya for a formal briefing when a mission of special importance was in the offing -once every few months, and that was it. Illya had been hard at work in the mopping-up, Napoleon knew. But it had been worth it, worth it all; THRUSH was in critical condition, and there was no longer any real chance of remission. Now maybe he and Illya would have a chance to see more of each other, to do some talking about old times. Illya would be there, soon, in fact, to discuss the ramifications of this last incident in Kabul. He was looking forward to a chance to visit with Illya, he was.

And there, now, Napoleon heard Illya's voice in the hall, just outside the door. A bit of a disturbance, too -- someone was upset, very upset. Napoleon wondered what was coming down. Through the indistinct -- but distinctly unhappy -- babble of voices Illya's came clear and calm as always. "It's all right, Mr. Finisger. I'll take the report in to Mr. Solo. No, it isn't your fault. Don't worry. We don't shoot the bearers of bad tidings any more."

The door opened inward on this last phrase, and Illya backed into the room, still soothing the upset operative. Then Illya turned to Napoleon, pushing the door shut firmly behind him, leaning up against it for one moment in a gesture of humorous relief at his escape. Napoleon smiled warmly. Just for one moment, it was as if the years had not passed, just like old times again. And the years had dealt more kindly with Illya than with Napoleon, in any case. Napoleon had already begun to grey; but Illya -- whose forehead was high, whose hairline had always receded, whose thatch of straw-colored hair did not show the grey -- did not look his fifty years. His age was beginning to show, just beginning, in the skin at his wrists, his throat, his eyes; but Illya looked much younger than Napoleon did now. And the lively expression in his eyes was unchanged --

"Here," Illya said, and handed Napoleon a piece

of fax he held in his one hand. "This is what caused the commotion outside. I'm afraid you won't like it, Napoleon. The base is going to have to evacuate."

Napoleon's pleasure at seeing Illya again -- as well as the pertinent questions he had to ask about Illya's presence in Kabul -- were set aside temporarily. Napoleon read the fax in growing concern and increasing worry. "Illya...what is this? Soviet ground troops -- crossing the border?"

"There's more, Napoleon. I told you you wouldn't like it. Is there any whiskey?"

Napoleon pointed to the makeshift bar in the corner, not looking up, his attention absorbed by the startling report once more. When he finished he re-read the entire message, and then he looked up. "Is the evacuation under way?"

Illya had seated himself in one of the armchairs with his drink in his hand. He was still wearing the woolen mountaineer's clothing he'd shown up at the golf course in, his greatcoat open from throat to hem. "Not to worry, Napoleon. The local station has had very little warning, but I daresay you'll all get out in good time."

"An invasion," said Napoleon wonderingly. "A full-scale, overt, inexcusable...and the oil fields are already secured -- I can't believe this, Illya."

"Well, actually, I don't think the oil fields are quite sewn up, the local insurgents have bombed the superstructures -- but that doesn't really make much difference in the end. Oh, it's true enough."

"How $\underline{\text{could}}$ it be? We had no report of this --we should have had figures, operations orders, information on the buildup! When I get hold of the border listening posts --"

"There's really no point in being angry about it, Napoleon. The fact is there. It wasn't the listening posts that were at fault anyway -- they did a very good job of signalling this invasion, actually. It's too bad, a shame to waste such good intelligence. What happened was simply that the reports were all intercepted; and then of course false intelligence was forwarded to the computer, and false reports -- false acknowledgments -- returned to the posts themselves."

Napoleon listened in growing consternation. "You're postulating -- a traitor in our ranks, Illya. One of our own, gone bad. I'd hate to think --"

But Illya interrupted. "Oh, no, Napoleon. Not a traitor, not at all. There was no subversion involved -- just the use of the grant of extraordinary discretion."

"That's worse, Illya. You know how few agents are ever granted powers of extraordinary discretion. It's got to be a <u>senior</u> enforcement agent, if what you're saying is true -- but -- who?"

"I should imagine that the obvious culprit is going to be whichever of your senior enforcement agents is most strongly committed to the preservation

of Soviet hegemony."

"You've got me there, Illya. Please, this isn't a time for riddles...I can't quite grasp it. I can't even think of a senior enforcement agent who would -- why, none of our senior agents are even ethnically Russian --"

"Except for me, of course," Illya put in.

"Except for you, and you're above -- oh, Illya. Illya, don't joke. No...you're not joking, are you? No, tell me you're pulling my leg, Illya. Don't tell me you're -- you -- a traitor --"

"No traitor, Napoleon," Illya agreed. "No traitor. I am -- as I have always been -- a loyal servant of my government. You always would forget, Napoleon."

"How could you even make the <u>suggestion</u>, then? Illya. Your sense of humor, really -- it's very badly timed. One minute a traitor, next minute a loyal citizen of the --"

"Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," Illya said quietly. "I'm sorry, Napoleon. I really thought Mr. Waverley had finally told you. I am Russian, after all."

"Your oath of citizenship -- means nothing, then?" Napoleon's voice was harsh with outrage -- and a forlorn hope. But no, he'd known Kuryakin far too long, and Illya was not jesting with him.

"Napoleon, you're not paying attention. I never took an oath for American citizenship. Yes, my passport says differently -- some of the time. But that was part of the bargain, when my government released me to UNCLE. Mr. Waverley fudged the books. He knew the cover would never hold without citizenship -- but my government had arranged it, my loan was only on condition that I wouldn't be required to renounce my loyalty. Think about it, Napoleon. Would UNCLE have ever been able to hope for the full and ready cooperation of the Kremlin if the organization had flaunted a traitor, defector, so highly placed in the organization?"

Napoleon could not reply for his life. The things Illya was saying, they made such perfect sense, but they were -- they had to be -- so perfectly wrong...

"But then we were going to have to work together, you and I, and there was no room for less than perfect trust. Mr. Waverley knew your prejudice, Napoleon, against Communists in general, and Russians in particular. He deplored it -- but there it was. And so it could not be made known to you, that I was still a major in the -- what you still call the KGB."

"Illya, for god's sake -- the secret police -- a major?" $\,$

"I've been promoted since," Illya assured him proudly. "But yes, a major in the secret police. On loan -- or in exile, depending on your point of view -- to UNCLE, to Mr. Waverley, to aid in the great struggle against THRUSH. My government realized even that long ago that THRUSH would be the

only real threat to the successful execution of the Party's plans."

"And now," Napoleon observed -- his throat very dry, all of a sudden -- "now, of course, THRUSH no longer presents a threat. Is that it?"

"That is <u>exactly</u> it, Napoleon. It's really all very logical and reasonable, when you consider it... the mission is complete, THRUSH is destroyed, I have been called home. The oil fields, that was a bit of a bonus -- well worth waiting six months more for, don't you agree?"

"I'm sure you must think so," Napoleon assented, dryly. Then -- "You're going where? Home? Illya, you know what happens to your repatriated countrymen. You won't be allowed to go home...they'll send you off to prison -- Siberia --"

Illya simply shrugged, apparently unperturbed. "Siberia's not such a bad place, Napoleon. I don't see why not. I could go live with my son -- my oldest, he's commandant of a workfarm in Siberia. And my wife will join me."

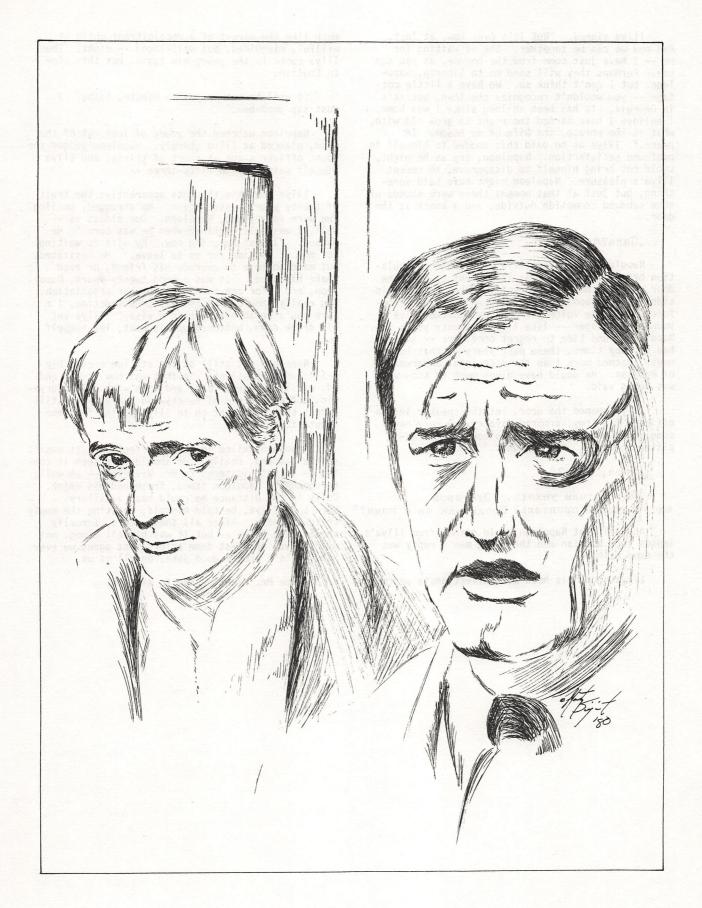
Revelation upon revelation, confusion on confusion. "Your -- what?"

"My wife, Masha. You've met her, Napoleon. In the brothel in Amsterdam, do you remember?"

And yes, Napoleon did remember. He'd always counted it one of Illya's human weaknesses -- which were to be prized as few and far in-between. But when Illya <u>had</u> patronized a brothel, Napoleon realized with a start, nine times out of ten it had been the same one, a quiet little house in one of the more respectable suburbs in Amsterdam. The lady of the house, now that Napoleon stopped to think about it, was a Russian expatriate herself -- or, by this new version of Illya's life, a Russian agent herself. And the woman that Illya would go see, then -- his wife? Napoleon could vaguely remember having seen the woman once, a strikingly handsome woman, ash blonde, of the regal countenance that sometimes showed so disconcertingly among the households of Georgian Boyar families. He remembered -- he blushed with shame to remember it -- that he himself had entertained the notion of returning to that house without Illya, to obtain the services of -and she was Illya's wife?

"How many years has it been, Napoleon? And for all these years -- to see my wife, the mother of my sons, only once every six months...one day, one night, every half-year -- it has been hard, Napoleon."

And that would explain it all, too. Illya's sexual abstention, his ambivalent feelings about other women, his reactions when he'd been -- well, unfaithful. That's what it came down to. Illya -- it was apparent in his voice, his eyes, when he spoke about her -- was very much in love with his wife, with the woman his duty had denied him for now more than twenty years. Napoleon forgot his outrage for a moment in impressed sympathy for Illya's way of life -- yes, he could well imagine it, from what all he knew of Illya, his passionate feelings, his equally passionate pursuit of his duty -- yes, it must have been hard.



Illya sighed. "But it's over now, at last. And now we can be together. She is waiting for me -- I have just come from the border, as you can see. Perhaps they will send me to Siberia, Napoleon, but I don't think so. We have a little cottage -- you wouldn't recognize the town, but it's in Georgia. It has been so long since I was home. I believe I have earned the right to grow old with, what is the phrase, the wife of my bosom. In peace." Illya as he said this nodded to himself in profound satisfaction. Napoleon, try as he might, could not bring himself to disapprove, to resent Illya's pleasure. Napoleon might have said something, but just at that moment there were sounds of some subdued commotion outside, and a knock at the door.

"Папа?"

Napoleon stared at Illya with sudden speculation bright in his eyes as Illya went to open the door -- which he had apparently locked from the inside, though Napoleon had not been aware of it before this. The voice had been not unlike Illya's; younger, stronger -- like Illya's twenty years ago. Napoleon found time to regret once more -- as he had so many times, these past years -- that he had never learned more than the occasional swearword of Russian. He would have given much to know what was being said.

Illya opened the door, let the speaker in; an officer, Red Army, armored cavalry. A very handsome young man. "My son, Napoleon," Illya explained proudly. "My youngest."

"Пора, Саша?"

"Да, готовы уехать. Это твой американский приятель? Поедит-ли он с нами?"

And all that Napoleon could gather from Illya's lapses into Russian and the young man's reply was the name Sasha.

Illya shook his head with affectionate regret,

much like the parent of a recalcitrant child -willful, misguided, but well-loved -- might. Then Illya spoke to the young man again, but this time in English.

"I will be out in just a minute, Sasha. I must say good-bye."

Napoleon watched the young officer out of the room, glanced at Illya sharply. Napoleon judged the young officer's age at short of thirty; and Illya himself wasn't quite fifty-three --

Illya knew his thoughts apparently; the fruit of twenty years' association. He shrugged, smiling. "We were very young, Napoleon. Our oldest is --well, I was only eighteen when he was born." He paused. "I must be going now. My wife is waiting for me; it is time for us to leave." He hesitated, but made no move to embrace his friend, or even shake his hand. "It was a good twenty years, Napoleon, and I for one do not regret our association. You really should come and visit us sometime; I'm sure you'd be able to obtain a visa." Illya set his drink down, buttoned up his coat, let himself out.

Napoleon sat still as the station around him fell gradually silent. So that was how it all ended, was it? Twenty years and more with Illya Kuryakin, and at the end of twenty-odd years -- he still didn't know what went on in Illya's mind from one minute to the next.

Napoleon smiled in rueful affection. It wasn't such a bad end, really. He should have seen it coming -- if he'd <u>listened</u> to Mr. Waverley -- ah well, he thought. Napoleon stood, freshened his drink. Dully in the distance he could hear artillery. Here's to Illya, he told himself, toasting the empty chair silently. After all these years, I really should have known -- but it was him all along, not me. Illya, the best damn enforcement agent we ever had...it's a pretty good joke, on all of us.

Shame Mr. Waverley had to miss it.

The Ragged Star Seed Rag

(To the tune of Gilligan's Island)

Many a year has come and gone since last we saw that ship. Her crew has died 'tis sad to tell, and cannot make the trip. But tho' they're gone, their fame lives on 'cause they were real pips. And the name of the very boldest one's on every ensign's lips.

CHORUS: Oh! Captain Kirk was a busy man, a busy man was he
To have sired so many sons and daughters across the galaxy.
No happier lot nor braver brood these worlds shall ever see!
Oh! Captain Kirk was a busy man, a busy man was he.

Their five-year mission out in space was to find new life, you see. But if they couldn't find a "critter" to suit them to a "T", Captain Kirk would up and say, "Now I guess it's up to me. I'll just have to supply 'em!" And he did so dutifully.

CHORUS

Also aboard this novel ship was Vulcan Mr. Spock. By virtue of his heritage with no one's lips he'd lock. And Captain Kirk, that trusting soul and interstellar jock, Felt safe to leave his women with the stoic Mr. Spock.

CHORUS

And now, my friend, we near the end; the story is almost told Of Captain Kirk the Tireless; of Kirk the Brave, the Bold. But I leave with you a question left unanswered thru the years: How could so many sons of Captain Kirk's been born with pointed ears?

CHORUS

Judy Ferguson Clark

What Honor Demands

Charla Menke

Lt. Commander Scott shook his head with grim reluctance. "Captain, I canna say I like this sendin' you and Mr. Spock down to an unpopulated planet, unarmed at that, and the rest of us sailin' off for days and strandin' ye there."

Captain James Kirk turned a twinkling eye in his Chief Engineer's direction. "I appreciate your concern, Scotty, but Starfleet Command wants us to have a look at this new computerized weapon that's up for sale. They didn't exactly ask for our opinion of the inspection conditions."

Scott nodded, a troubled look still on his face. "Aye, sir. I know that, but I still dinna like it much."

"It is a matter of duty, Mr. Scott, not personal preference." This came from Spock, already on the transporter platform. "Captain, I believe we are overdue on the surface."

Kirk joined his First Officer on the platform. "We've got our communicators, Scotty. We'll give you the go-ahead after we beam down. Mind the ship, and we'll see you in a few days."

"Aye, sir. Good luck to ye..." Their forms dematerialized before his eyes as he muttered, "Ye may need it."

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They materialized just outside a sprawling building complex on the planet's dusty surface. They were in a narrow valley with rocky hillsides

rising into mountains behind them. To the left of the complex before them several openings could be seen in the face of the rock wall. It was obviously the remains of some sort of mining operation. A figure approached them wearing coveralls of a pale yellow material and a flat black hat on what appeared to be an otherwise bald head.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "It is unfortunate my tricorder was prohibited, Captain. I believe this creature is an android."

Kirk nodded his agreement as the automaton stopped before them. "You are welcome here, Captain Kirk and Commander Spock," it said pleasantly. "I shall show you to your apartment, if you will follow me."

Kirk's communicator beeped. He opened it and a Scottish burr requested a status report. "Kirk here, Scotty. We arrived in fine shape and have already been welcomed. Comply with your instructions. Kirk out." He turned to the android. "We'll follow you now." Kirk shrugged a sheepish look at Spock. For all his experience with alien forms, the captain had never quite adjusted to addressing machines as though they were people.

"Apparently a most sophisticated operation, Captain," Spock observed as they followed their mechanical guide. "I am curious as to the nature of this new weapon we are to consider for purchase."

"Patience, Spock," Kirk counseled. "It shouldn't be too long now."

Within the central complex, Klingon Commander Kell chuckled in his throat as he watched on a view-screen the trio's progress toward the building. His mirth held an ugly tone. "So the Federation truly believes it is to bid on a weapon. You have done an excellent job so far, Korvath!" He slapped the back of a small bald man in gray robes standing beside him, still listening to the android's audio transmission. The forbidding Klingon chortled. "When does the demonstration begin?"

The bald head shook. "Not until our other guests are summoned here," the man addressed as Korvath replied. "You must remember, Kell, they are bidders too."

"Yes, of course, of course," said the Klingon with impatience. "Just don't waste so much time that the Federationists become suspicious."

The other man laughed now; a hollow, mirthless sound. "Don't worry. I've waited a long time for the Vulcan to help me with this demonstration. I don't intend to wait much longer."



The android had led his charges to a small furnished apartment in a wing of the complex. "Refreshments have been provided. You will please remain here until the demonstration begins."

Kirk quickly surveyed the comfortable room outfitted with couches, desk and scientific journals, and seemed satisfied that this was a scholar's retreat. "When do we meet our host?" he asked nonchalantly, hoping to learn something.

"When he desires it," came the programmed answer. "You will wait here." The android left.

Kirk watched the door close after it. "Curious, Spock. You do suppose there is someone else here besides us and that walking, talking banana, don't you?"

Spock inclined his head to one side. "I fail to see why you find it necessary to describe the android as an anthropomorphic plant, Captain." Kirk smiled as Spock had intended him to do. "However, I do believe that other life forms are present here. I do not believe that fruit-bearing plants practice cannibalism," he continued as he peeled a blue alien fruit with a silver knife provided along with fruit bowl, decanter and goblets.

"So we wait..." Kirk selected an appealing apple.

"Apparently, Captain."

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Kell and Korvath had been joined by the Klingon commander's subordinate and the other two bidders from the distant planetary system known as the Stellar Protectorate. The Protectorate warriors, with their shining body armor and brightly colored uniforms, made quite a contrast to the somber presence of the Klingons. They and their host watched the scene being played out for them on the large viewscreen. The concealed video eye revealed Kirk munching on his second apple.

One man clad in armor stood with the graceful attitude of natural dignity. "You did not tell us that the others were from the Federation, nor that one was to be a Vulcan."

Korvath smiled at the tall man who spoke. Lord Cam, I was not aware that this would be of consequence to the Protectorate."

The man in the silver breastplate waved a powerful arm, heavy with shining bracelets, in careless ease. "My Chief Counselor, Brek, has long been interested in Vulcan literary forms and history although we have never contacted the Federation."

The smaller man beside him now spoke. "Are they to be bidders also, Korvath?"

Again the bald inventor smiled a cool imitation of good nature. "Perhaps. For the time being they serve as part of my demonstration. Observe." His fingers touched and turned dials and switches on the console in the center of the room.

On the monitor screen the observers saw the Vulcan suddenly stiffen. Kirk too had noticed a change. "Spock, what is it?"

The Vulcan officer was staring fixedly ahead of him with a look of concentration creasing his forehead. Concerned, Kirk moved to stand beside the Vulcan. "Spock," he said gently, hesitating to touch him.

"I am...in mind link." The words came with difficulty.

"With whom?"

"With what, Captain. I have known this touch before...years ago...an experiment utilizing Vulcans..."

The Vulcan's eyes closed as he fought the uncomfortable sensation. "At the Academy...there was a Professor Korvath..." The Vulcan was visibly trembling with his effort to speak.

Kirk watched the Vulcan struggle for control. "You said something about an experiment?"

Spock nodded, tight-lipped. "Yes. A computer he designed to impart information...instantaneous learning...using a mind link contact."

Kirk searched his memory. "I have never heard of such a development."

The Vulcan shook his head. "We...recommended it be abandoned. We foresaw...dangerous applications...tangential to the original concept."

Kirk suddenly understood. "You mean mind control or...mind reading?" His eyes widened as Spock's gaze met his. "Is that what's happening, Spock?"

The Vulcan looked ashamed. "Yes, Captain.

Apparently Korvath has perfected his machine to extract information... Not destroyed it as we were told."

"And it's here? It's the new weapon we were sent here to inspect?"

"I believe so. And Jim..." Spock's voice was charged with a vibretto of warning. "It still possesses my thought pattern. It knows my mind."

Kirk did not miss the implication. "How well, Spock?"

"There are no secrets...in mind link. Eventually...it will know all I know." His silence was eloquent.

Kirk touched the Vulcan's shoulder. "Can you break the link, Spock?"

"No. The machine has...a reservoir of power ...greater than mine. I can, however,...inhibit the process to some degree."

The starship captain's hazel eyes threw flame. "Well then, we'll just have to break it from the other end. I think it's time I spoke to our unseen host about his 'weapon'."

There was silence around the console as the five men watched Kirk futilely try to open the door of the apartment. Korvath glowed with triumph. "You see, gentlemen, as I promised you, a weapon of invincibility! All it requires is the thought pattern of an individual and it can possess all his knowledge within hours, despite any attempts to stop it. This is a considerable improvement over the old Klingon mindsifter, with its need for physical contact and its violent destruction. Even a Vulcan's formidable mental disciplines pose no problem."

Lord Cam turned from the screen to the grayrobed man. "We were promised there would be no danger and no injury. We cannot allow a life to be threatened when there is no challenge to honor and no warfare."

"There is none, Lord Cam. The Vulcan may resist, but he cannot prevent my psionic computer from accumulating all his knowledge. No doubt you see the obvious benefits of this device in espionage?"

The slighter Protectorate warrior moved up to stand beside his commander. Their glances met as he too took his gaze from the monitor screen. There was uneasiness in the depths of his alert, expressive green eyes. He shook his rust-gold curls and studied his host as he spoke. "Then the information you hope to gain from the Vulcan is also for sale?"

Korvath spread his hands in an act of innocent surprise. "But of course! The Federation owes me something for its early rejection of my efforts. If some secrets add sweetening to the pot...all the better!"

The dark eyes of the Protectorate Lord sized up the inventor. "I do not believe that the Federation captain likes your seasoning."

"Let him choke on it then!" Kell thundered as he and his subordinate faced the fair-skinned pair. "We are all warriors here! Kirk will bid or not, but one of us leaves here with the psionic device and the Federation's defense plans."

"I believe we understand each other, Klingon," replied Cam. He turned back to the screen. "But perhaps it is time to explain things to Captain Kirk."

They could hear the human captain demanding that the android contact his master. Korvath's eyes were cold, glittering and as immovable as the stars. "Let him wait for a time. When I have collected enough information to prove the worth of my computer, then I will entertain Captain Kirk. Until then, let the Vulcan feel the touch of my machine."

The armored warrior nodded, one hand on the heavy golden pendant that hung around his neck. "Very well. We shall await your summons." He strode to the doorway with all the regal bearing of his heritage. Counselor Brek held the door for the Protectorate Lord, who hesitated to speak once more with their host. "We are anxious to see if all is as you promised."

 $\mbox{\ensuremath{\mbox{He}}}$ left as the two Klingons scowled in his direction.

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Outside the building in the freshness of air that was not recirculated, Cam studied his friend's face closely. "Something troubles you, Brek?"

The younger man nodded as they walked away from the entrance, careful not to be overheard.

"I too am worried," Lord Cam admitted. "Chief Counselor, I ask your advice."

The green eyes sparkled at the title which they seldom used between them. "My Lord, Korvath seeks vengeance on the Vulcan for some old injury, real or imagined."

"Agreed."

"And the invitation to the Federation was a ruse. I do not believe that Korvath intends to honor their bid." The fine featured face was solemn. He laid one hand upon his commander's arm and gripped it with tense strength. "Cam, there is treachery here."

The commander nodded as he finished the thought. "And where there is one treachery, there may yet be another."

It was as if an invisible cloud had suddenly thrown a shadow on the Counselor's earnest face. "I would feel more secure if I knew you were safe aboard the *Aldebaran*."

The Protectorate Lord smiled. "But we are here, and we have been dealt no treachery as yet."

"We have also not seen the proof of Korvath's boasts," Brek reminded him.



"The Protectorate expects us to remain until we have either purchased, rejected or, at the least, taken the measure of this new weapon." Cam's voice dropped a level in confidence. "We are not weaponless. You were, as always, wise in counsel there." His gray eyes sparkled in appreciation.

Brek's hand unconsciously rested on his heavy leather sword belt, stripped of its scabbard, but not of all its means of protection. He spoke, half to himself. "We do not desire battle knowledge of the Federation."

"No, but we do seek to protect ourselves."

The Chief Counselor's eyes were distant, remembering. "When our people met them distant ages ago, the Vulcans were a warrior race like ours. Even though they have since chosen alliance with the Federation, I am disturbed to see such a heritage of honor so abused. I am suspicious of this business, My Lord. Perhaps we should intervene..." He stopped as his leader shook his head.

"Not without sufficient provocation. The Protectorate interests must come first, and I have no intention of leaving here without knowing the disposition of Korvath's psionic weapon." His eyes held a knowing look. "Especially not with warloving Klingons at our back."

"Very well, My Lord, but you will not object if I seek my own path for a time?" A secret light burned in the green eyes.

Cam knew his mind was already set. "No...but do not let it take you too far from me."

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"Korvath will see you now." Standing in the hallway was their android 'host' who had kept the apartment locked on command while Kirk had ranted within at the insult to the Federation. Now as he faced the impassive figure, it no longer seemed as innocuous as it had when he and Spock first arrived.

Spock's eyes sought Kirk's. The Vulcan was still fighting the drain on his mind as he had been for some time.

Kirk walked over to Spock, letting the android stand waiting in the hallway. "I must talk to this man, Spock," Kirk whispered softly. "Perhaps I can persuade him to stop this, now that he has given us a sufficient 'demonstation'."

"I doubt that, Captain. There is...deception here. Be careful."

"What about you, Spock?"

Spock's voice was choppy. "Difficult, Captain. Once you leave I shall attempt...a trance state. It should allow me...to concentrate on repelling this...invasion of my thoughts."

"Good. By then I may have achieved an end to this."

Spock's voice held his commander from the door a moment longer. "Jim...I cannot fight this off...

indefinitely. Sooner or later...I shall weaken... If Korvath's machine is not stopped by then...I shall not...be able to control its absorption...of all I know." His voice betrayed his chagrin at the intrusion of his privacy and his inability to halt it.

Kirk touched the lean shoulder in silent affection. "I understand, Spock. I have no intention of letting you endure this much longer. Just stall long enough for me to do whatever's necessary to get us out of this. I'll put a stop to this, I promise you!"

Spock's face was a study of restricted emotion. "I should prefer to stay with you."

Kirk smiled. "I'd like that myself, Spock. Just hang on. I'll be back as soon as possible."

The Vulcan's final words reached Kirk as he stepped through the doorway. "Guard yourself, Jim!"

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Preceded by his android escort, Kirk burst into the control room like an avenging angel. He glared at the strangely armored men he saw standing near the door. They reminded him of old Terran legends of castles and knights. "Where is Korvath?" he demanded in righteous anger as the two aliens turned toward him. "And who are you?"

The green-eyed, fair-haired one stepped forward as though barely able to restrain some surge of action. The chain mail of his tunic glittered like his eyes. "This is the Starlord Cam, Commander of the Stellar Protectorate ship *Aldebaran*. I am his Chief Counselor, Brek." There was a ring of pride in the words.

"We all know who you are, Captain Kirk," challenged a deep voice. "Do you recognize me?"

Kirk whirled and faced the two Klingons who had entered the room behind him. His anger burst into a fury of suspicion. "Kell! What are you doing here?"

A mild voice from a doorway to his left drew his attention next. "I am Korvath. These gentlemen have been invited here, Captain Kirk, the same as you." The gray robed, bald inventor savored the officer's outrage. "This is my planet, Captain. You would do well to remember that you are my guest." He smiled condescendingly.

Kirk bridled at the reproach. "And you, sir, would do well to treat your guests with more courtesy."

Korvath looked injured. "My dear Captain. I have developed a psionic computer capable of thought replication. Since I already possessed Commander Spock's thought patterns from earlier experimentation, expediency dictated that he provide my first demonstration for my prospective bidders."

Kirk gathered his command prestige and met the cool gaze with his own. Korvath continued without flinching. "My device requires no consent to function and it cannot be escaped. It is the perfect

secret weapon. Once it possesses a thought pattern, it has access to all memories, thoughts and knowledge. Think what that is worth, Captain!"

Kirk surveyed the room with a practiced eye. "It seems to me that one good phaser hit from a starship would take care of that, Korvath." He waited for his implied threat to penetrate.

Korvath's eyelids fluttered nervously. "This is only the terminal, Captain. The memory unit is well protected...even from a starship."

Counselor Brek interrupted. "Korvath is crafty, Captain Kirk. We are all weaponless here and without knowledge of the computer bank's location. Furthermore, until the bidding is finished, we are all convenient hostages held against any possible threat from our respective ships. Korvath has ordered both of them to remain outside his neutral perimeter." Kirk was grudgingly aware of the truth of Brek's words. Despite his anger, Kirk sensed a difference in the attitude of the two Protectorate officers from that of the Klingons.

Commander Kell thrust himself into the discussion. "This talk of bidding brings us to our purpose. Shall we begin?"

Kirk defied the Klingon before Korvath could answer. "I shall discuss nothing until this abuse of my First Officer has stopped!"

The Starlord's heavy ornaments gleamed in the artificial light. He looked a prince among commoners. "Surely as a show of good faith, Korvath, the request is reasonable?"

The inventor switched on the monitor screen and adjusted several controls. "As you wish. You can see that the drain on the Vulcan has been arrested."

So, they have been watching all along, Kirk thought with discomfort. He was, however, relieved to see that the muscles in Spock's face relaxed. On the screen, the Vulcan looked faintly surprised at his sudden release from the mind link. "That's better," Kirk said, feeling some satisfaction. Now he could concentrate on making some sense of this.

"Now, gentlemen," Korvath began formally, "if you will please attend me in the next room, we can begin to discuss a time for a further demonstration of the accuracy and storage capabilities of my computer, possible terms of sale, and so on..."

Kell dismissed his subordinate and watched him leave before following Korvath.

"Brek shall await me here." Cam nodded to his Counselor and followed the Klingon. Kirk took one last look on the viewscreen at Spock's restored composure and preceded Korvath and his android through the doorway.

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Brek watched the door close behind them and decided to take advantage of the time by studying the control terminal. It made him vaguely uneasy that Korvath seemed so unconcerned about security.

As he studied the unlabeled switches and dials, he thought he detected some of their various functions. He was startled, however, by a sudden automatic flurry of activity on the console. Lights blinked, dials turned, and gauges fluctuated wildly. The vague uneasiness spurred him to check the monitor. One look at the Vulcan told him something was terribly wrong.

Spock's face was contorted in pain and his head jerked occasionally as though some force were assaulting him. He shook his head slowly, then violently, as though fighting unbearable pain. The mask of cool detachment crumbled as his resistance failed against the renewed onslaught.

It dawned on Brek that he had caught Korvath in a lie. He had set some delayed timing device to lull the Federation captain into false security, while actually intensifying his information drain on the Vulcan.

The pain on Spock's face was deeply etched, soul-searing. There could be no doubt that Korvath had no intention of relinquishing his hold on the Vulcan's mind and undoubtedly the scene in the next room had been carefully staged to waste time while more precious data was collected on the Federation's defenses.

A gnawing doubt bit through the Counselor's assurance. What was it Korvath had boasted earlier? "My device requires no consent to function..." There was indeed treachery here. He now had proof of that. But its extent was still unknown. Was it only an old hatred for the Vulcan and the Federation...or was it more?

The Counselor felt pity for the Vulcan first officer. To be forced to betray his service, his friends, would be devastating to the Vulcan's integrity. Brek knew what it was to serve with a devotion that went beyond duty. He had seen the light in the Vulcan's eyes when his captain was near. He knew it to be the reflection of the kinship deep bonds create. Brek was well aware that those bonds could both bless and burn. Clearly they branded the Vulcan now.

Spock had forced himself to the desk in the room. He sat there now, concentrating, grim determination on his angular face. He clutched a shaky pen above paper. Then he began to write steadily. Write what, the Counselor wondered? Amidst such antagonism and fighting to maintain his mental discipline, what could the Vulcan possibly be composing? That knowledge was beyond his ken until he saw the Vulcan rise, fold the paper and address it, like a missive. There was only one being on the planet to whom he would be writing. Brek saw the Vulcan's glance fall on the ornate silver knife still resting on the table by the fruit bowl. Driven by pain and urgency, his inescapable logic told him there was only one possible solution to the problem. The Counselor recognized that fact as he switched off the monitor and ran for the corridor.

A high-pitched whine summoned Korvath and his bidders from their frustrating confrontation back to the control room. It was unoccupied.

"What is wrong?" demanded Kell unpleasantly.

"The computer has been interfered with." Korvath flipped switches madly.

"I thought this machine was infallible?" sneered the Klingon.

Korvath snapped back. "This is no machine malfunction, Kell." He flipped on the monitor screen. The guest apartment appeared empty. He turned the screen off.

Kirk raced from the control room, directly behind the android. A startled Korvath turned to Kell. "Stop him!" Kell called to his subordinate, passing the order on to him.

Cam dipped his head as though acknowledging an unspoken request. "I shall go also, Korvath." He left as Kell and the scientist began to argue again.

Kirk plunged down the hall, unmindful of anyone at his back. After what seemed eternity, he reached the apartment door. The android had gotten there first, and both the Klingon and the Starlord were right behind the starship captain.

Kirk was nearly run down by the android as it exited the apartment. He planted himself directly before it. "Where's Spock?"

The android brushed him aside effortlessly. "The Vulcan is within...dead."

Kirk's blood became hot lava in his veins.
"Spock!" He fought with a bitter anger the android hands that now restrained him. He broke free and ran into the room.

The Vulcan lay on the floor behind the table, shielded by it from the video eye. Kirk knelt beside the still figure. Spock's face was frozen into a solemn mask.

Kirk's throat was constricted with despair. His voice was barely above a whisper as he sought to rouse his friend. "Spock..." His hand struggled to find a pulse in his first officer's neck. In final desperation, Kirk bent to listen at Spock's side for the reassuring murmur of the Vulcan's heart, and he saw the knife on the floor, and blood, not more than a trickle of green, from a small wound in his side.

"Spock..." It was a whisper, a prayer, a sob. Something inside Kirk snapped. He was on his feet, rushing the door, intent on smashing the android to bits with his bare hands. "Murderer!" he screamed after the already vanished mechanism.

The Starlord was suddenly in his path. "No, Captain Kirk, there is no murder here." Strong hands fought the captain's nearly insane strength. "Listen to me! No android did this!" The Starlord shook him violently and waved a paper before his eyes.

Kirk turned wounded eyes upon the handsome face that challenged him. Lord Cam's chiseled features softened. "He left this on the desk...for you." Disconsolate, confused, Kirk stared at the letter the Starlord pressed into his hand. "Read it," came the firm direction.

Kirk, numb with shock, walked dazedly to the other side of the room. It felt as if lead weights slowed his movement. Silently he read.

Jim.

The machine has begun to drain my thoughts more rapidly than before. In moments it will touch my most intimate thoughts...those we have shared, as well as Federation secrets. I can no longer fight it, nor can I betray that which I have sworn to protect. What I do must be done. A Vulcan would understand the logic of it, but I know that you will rage against it. I ask that you attempt to understand what honor demands, and I hope that one day you may forgive me.

Spock

Kirk refolded the letter like a man in a trance and thrust it under his tunic while his eyes closed in grief. When his hazel eyes reopened, they fastened on the bony Vulcan face. Grief tore at Kirk's throat with claws of steel.

The captain's gaze studied the Vulcan: every line, every feature. They were already familiar and memorized beyond forgetting, held secure against the ravages of time. The terrible loss continued to clutch at him. To have lost Spock...and by the Vulcan's own hand! He closed his eyes once more to prevent the tears which threatened to overspill them.

The Starlord moved to the door and closed it as he stepped outside. The Klingon warrior glowered at him, disapproving. Cam fended him off with a single look. "The man has lost his comrade. He is entitled to his farewell." He had seen in Kirk's eyes more than he wanted to know.

Within the room, Kirk carried the Vulcan's body to a couch and composed it. From a distance he heard a voice coughing out its anguish. He did not recognize it as his own. Inconsolable sadness washed over him as he knelt beside his old friend.

Waves of memory flooded over him. How often had he listened down long corridors for that light, quick step, aching for the strength of that lean arm? He had longed for Spock's mellow voice in the loneliness of a thousand empty silences. Kirk cherished the intimate knowledge he had been given in a bond beyond words. Now he would walk alone forever ...separated from his Vulcan friend by a void greater than the infinity of space.

He sensed the loss of something central to his being. Only his desire for vengeance would sustain him now. Tears ran, unheeded, down his cheeks. To lose Spock like this was...unthinkable! If only he had not left him! The pain wrenched through him in diabolical torture.

Kirk heard steps approaching and looked up as the Starlord touched his shoulder. "I am sorry to intrude, Captain, but the android will have reached Korvath by now. Your time is short." Kirk stood with difficulty and felt the tears starting to dry on his cheeks. If the Starlord noticed them, he gave no sign. "My time?" Kirk felt his mind attempting to function through its numbness.

The Starlord drew him by the arm against the wall which concealed the monitor's eye. If it was in use, it would not see them there. His voice was soft, the shadow of a whisper. "Korvath's treachery is now clear, Captain. He did not stop the drain...he intensified it! Do you think he will allow you to roam free when he does not yet possess all he desires?"

Kirk became faintly aware of the threat that stalked him.

"Korvath and the Klingons will be on their way here. If you remain you will be used just as your friend was."

Kirk looked at the gray eyes and questioned them with his own. "Why would you help me? We're strangers..."

The Starlord's eyes held a starshine Kirk found disturbingly reminiscent of another's. "Your culture and mine both value discipline and honor, Captain." He was looking past Kirk's head at Spock. "His was a valiant act of sacrifice...to die an honorable death rather than to live with betrayal." His gaze locked with Kirk's. "I know what it is to possess such loyalty. I know what it is to command such men."

"But what about you? Can you still be safe here?"

Lord Cam shook his head. "Unknown. We have not suffered from such treachery as yet, but it may be that Korvath will seek to sell us to the Klingons. As yet, I am uncertain."

He put something into Kirk's hand. "You will need a weapon..." It was the silver knife, wiped clean. He saw the pain etched deeply on Kirk's face and shook him once again. "Captain, he bought your chance for freedom with his life! Do not waste it!"

Kirk nodded grimly. "Come with me?"

"No. I have not seen Brek for some time now. I must find him. This chance is yours. If I find treachery to the Protectorate, we shall join you." He saw Kirk cast a sorrowful glance toward the couch. "I grieve with you for such a man," he said and Kirk believed him, "but there is no time now. Take the chance the confusion of his death provides."

Kirk hesitated for a split second, then thrust the silver weapon in his belt. The Starlord cautioned him. "The Klingon still waits. I shall distract him from pursuit, but will you do me the favor of striking me?"

Kirk nodded. They crept along the wall, still out of the monitor's view. Lord Cam opened the door, swiftly, unexpectedly, catching the Klingon off quard. Kirk struck a sturdy blow against the

Starlord, who stumbled backward against the startled man. The force of his fall brought them both down. They heard the sounds of approaching footsteps echoing down the corridor. Kirk caught the Starlord's eye as he took the knife from his belt.

"Stop! Stop him!" the Klingon cried out as the armored Starlord remained sprawled on top of him, but Kirk was gone.

Kirk ran until his heart pounded against his chest in protest. He hesitated once, hands on his knees, mouth sucking for air, trying to catch his breath and find new strength. For the first time, he saw a Klingon behind him in pursuit, disruptor in hand.

Kirk began to run again. The land surrounding the complex was too open. There was no place for ambush, and he would need an ambush in order to utilize Spock's knife.

Spock. He sensed the empty space beside him and knew he would never escape from the vacuum of that loss. Still, just the thought of him seemed to bring the deep, familiar glow that lit the recesses of Kirk's mind. He gripped the small knife more tightly in his hand. Instinctively, he felt that he was not alone.

The Klingon shook his head at the futility of Kirk's escape attempt. At stunning force, his disruptor would still reach Kirk long before he could reach the shelter of the rocks. The Klingon set his weapon and brought it to aim with the deliberate slowness of target practice. He never fired.

Kirk leapt behind the first good-sized boulder he passed. Then, and only then, did he dare look back for his pursuing enemy. He could not see him. Kirk felt a nudge of satisfaction. He had lost him. Then something jiggled in his mind. Where had the Klingon come from in the first place?

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Amid the ensuing confusion of Kirk's escape from the complex, Cam had been overlooked as he nursed his phantom injury. Korvath and Kell seemed unconcerned with the supposedly unsuspecting Starlord. Their only objective was to recover Kirk and the information that now only he possessed. It pleased Cam that Kirk had not been caught. His estimation of the Federation captain had been correct. While Kell and the scientist attempted to organize a search for Kirk, the Starlord had managed to gain a few moments of unsupervised freedom.

He twisted a dragon head on the the heavy golden bracelet which he wore. It activated his speaker signal. He moved it again, pacing beside the building complex, his impatient steps raising little clouds of sand. "Brek?"

"My Lord..."

"Brek!" His relief came with a sigh. "Where are you? The Vulcan is dead and Kirk has run to the high ground to elude the same fate."

The voice echoed back faintly. Cam could not be certain if the signal needed boosting or if Brek whispered. "I watched him flee. My Lord, the Klingon chasing him was one we have not seen before ...and he was armed. I struck him and took his weapon lest he take Kirk's life. I had hoped it would draw the others away from here if they thought Kirk armed."

"Have you learned of further treachery?" He cast anxious eyes about him.

"Yes, My Lord! I saw Korvath's android at the central mineshaft. He summoned more androids and more Klingons from within...perhaps a dozen...to assist in the search for Kirk." Lord Cam nodded. How like the Klingons to send twelve after one unarmed man. Brek continued. "I took the opportunity to investigate. The computer bank is here, My Lord, in the deepest shaft, secure from a vessel's attack."

The fear in Lord Cam's heart burst to his lips. "Brek, get out of there!"

The Starlord heard the calm, decisive tone that always preceded some precipitous action by his Counselor. "You go, My Lord, while the others are still drawn away in the search for Kirk. I have only to overload this Klingon disruptor and we shall all be free of the threat from this machine. It must be done."

The words were an echo of the Vulcan's, and he was dead. Cam struck a fist into his palm as he gauged Brek's determination. "I order you to rejoin me!"

"My Lord, last night as we were guests here, Korvath gained our thought patterns as we slept. I found the sensors in our pillows when I began to suspect as much." His voice was hushed. "They have been planning to drain our minds of secrets all along."

The Starlord shuddered involuntarily, torn between revulsion and rage. They had been used from the beginning, just like the Terran and the Vulcan. It was as he had feared. Both the Federation and the Protectorate were to be delivered to the bidder who had bought Korvath long ago...the Klingon Empire. He had a fleeting vision of his beloved Aldebaran being blown to spacedust by a Klingon heavy cruiser.

Brek's voice cut through the nightmare. "You must get away from here, My Lord. Go to the mountains. Find Kirk. Go now, before they realize you are suspicious. I shall join you as soon as I have done what must be done. Kirk will be your ally. Tell him..."

The transmissions stopped. The Protectorate Lord toyed with his speaker for a few seconds longer. There was no response to his signal. His miniature weapon came quickly to his hand from beneath the handworked sword belt. He scanned the area with quick eyes, determining the shortest, sheltered route towards the mines.

His decision was soon made for him. He saw Kell and a handful of androids and Klingons approaching. Lord Cam cursed silently and turned on his heel for the nearby outcropping of rock. Where there had been suspicion, there was now proven treachery. Where truce had been promised, there was death and injury. Now Brek was taken. The Starlord armed for war.

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Kirk sat in the darkness of night, chilled and alone. When his communicator beeped, the sound startled him like a voice from the grave. When it beeped again, he realized that someone had probably found Spock's communicator and was using it to call on him to surrender. At the thought of rough hands disturbing the Vulcan's final rest, Kirk knew he would take as many of them with him as the silver blade would allow. Surrender...Hell!

He flipped the communicator open and waited for Korvath's envenomed voice or Kell's harsh tones. He was puzzled when the voice belonged to neither one. "Kirk, this is Cam. I am below you ...alone. May I speak with you?"

Smart man to keep the transmission short in case they were being monitored. "Yes, come ahead." Kirk snapped his communicator shut and crouched behind a rock, the small knife glinting in the light of the two moons overhead. It could be a trick. A few minutes later when he caught the shine on the figured breastplate and medallion, he recognized the Starlord. He stood up, dusted off his trousers and put the knife away.

The Starlord stopped just below the boulder that concealed Kirk. "Captain, their treachery is proven. I have come to join you, if you will have me."

Kirk gestured around his secluded fortress of boulders. "It's cold and uncomfortable...but I'm glad to have you here."

The smile lit the gray eyes before it found his lips. "I would rather share discomfort with a comrade, than luxury with an enemy." He motioned for the captain to sit. "Rest. You must be exhausted. I shall keep watch." He knelt behind the boulder where Kirk had been sitting.

"How did you find me when the Klingons couldn't?"

Lord Cam smiled as he peered into the darkness below them. "The Klingons had no idea where to look. I considered where I would go, what I would do, in your situation. Eventually I struck your trail." He gave Kirk a sideways look. "I destroyed it as I followed it until the darkness caught me. Then I moved by instinct until I thought to try to find your frequency with my own speaker." He gestured to the dragon bracelet.

Lord Cam laughed scornfully. "They have all gone back to soft beds! The androids have been left to watch. They do not have the nerves for a night hunt!"

Kirk was unsure of how to phrase his next question, but he had to ask. "Where's your Counselor?"

He saw the tension draw the muscles tight. "Brek found that our thoughts had been patterned also, was well as your Vulcan's. He located the computer banks in the central mineshaft and set out to destroy them before Korvath could begin to use the device again."

Kirk felt the hesitation and was aware of how hard his own heart was beating. "And?" $\,$

"His transmission failed as we talked. I fear he has been taken prisoner."

Kirk felt despair again. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

Lord Cam's voice was tight with control. "They dare not kill him until they have what information they desire. Which, obviously with all the confusion, they do not have yet. He is safe from torture. We carry a drug in the case of such misfortune which renders us quite useless to persuasion." Kirk could see the Starlord was partly attempting to convince himself. He recognized on the handsome face a trace of his own agony.

"You must have served together for some time."

The armored star commander closed his eyes in silent remembrance. "We were raised together from childhood. We were trained to think, to act, to fight together as one unit. He is half my life." The dark eyes kindled with a flame that only Klingon blood would quench. "I shall have him back, Captain, or this dawn will see my death!"

Kirk nodded and felt their separate losses form one deadly decision. "We have to destroy that computer before they can use it, Cam, but damned if I know how, against armed Klingons and those androids..."

"We are not totally unarmed." The Starlord held out the tiny, circular weapon concealed in his belt. "We call it a savager."

Kirk studied it in wonder. "Something like our phasers?"

"I assume so. It is not overwhelming, but it will stop an android." $% \label{eq:control_stop} % \label{eq:control_stop}$

Kirk's eyes shone with battle fever. "And this will stop Klingons..." He held the silver blade as though it were a friend.

"We must move before dawn when they least expect an attack. Once we down a Klingon or two we will have disruptors. Then we will have the means to destroy Korvath's computer. They will be unprepared for an attack from us." The Protectorate Lord was thinking aloud and his confidence increased with every word. "I mean to have Brek safe."

Kirk nodded. "I'll go with you."

The Starlord extended his hand. "Allies?"

The Federation officer reached out and they caught each other at the wrist. Kirk felt his old confidence returning like water to a dry spring. "Allies..." he said.

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Two hours before planet dawn the captain and the Starlord left their rocky encampment. Kirk was encouraged to find Lord Cam acted as well as he talked. The man moved like a shadow in the darkness, swift and silent. He seemed to have a sense for stealth.

They threaded their way down the slope between the rocks and boulders, careful of their shadows in the moonlight. The androids kept watch far off to their right and it pleased Kirk that he had led them so far astray. There was no noise but the sound of their breathing. They listened for the sound of enemy movement near them. Kirk found himself wishing he had Spock's super-sensitive ears to assist him.

At the bottom of the incline they rested briefly, storing the strength they would need for the long, unprotected run to the mineshafts. The darkness was their only protection as they crossed the flat expanse of sand before the mines.

Cam went first, and Kirk marvelled at his agility beneath the heavy protective armor. He was all lean muscle. This was no warrior who fought his battles from a comfortable command chair. Kirk thought he would have liked to see him fully armed with blade and savager. He would have been a sight to impress even a Klingon warrior.

Cam stood ready to fire in Kirk's defense when he ran for the mines. There was an aura about the Starlord, an integrity that made him unquestionably trustworthy. Though they barely knew each other, Kirk had no qualms about placing his life in this ally's hands. He only hoped that he inspired as much confidence.

They hesitated just outside the central mine-shaft's entrance. They knew it would be guarded and, once inside, their earlier danger would seem like a peaceful dream. The Starlord took a position nearest the entrance.

At Cam's signal, Kirk tossed a large rock near the cavern's mouth. At the sound, an android sentry emerged. Kirk heard a faint hum as the Starlord's tiny weapon fired its orange beam. The sentry fell, sparks leaping from the hold in its torso. The two men slid around the entrance on either side, hugging the sidewalls, holding their breaths. So far...so good, Kirk thought.

They travelled several yards, alert and tense. The mines were well-lit and Kirk could see an intersecting passageway ahead. He knew that eventually the lateral cavern would connect to a vertical shaft.

Kirk heard the sound of opening doors and voices in the passageway before them. He tensed as Cam's weapon sent another android sprawling and heard the force of the Starlord's blow against the Klingon who jumped him. Then Kirk had no time to consider anything except his own assailant.

With hands locked together, the Klingon struck Kirk solidly. Then he reached for his disruptor. Kirk kicked the weapon from his opponent's hand and drove the silver blade deep into his abdomen. Lord Cam had brought one Klingon down with his savager, but another knocked it away as Kirk turned, breathing hard, from his own dead man. He threw before he thought.

The Starlord shoved his Klingon attacker's body to the cavern floor and retrieved the silver blade from his back. He wiped the blood on the Klingon uniform and handed it back to Kirk. He nodded his satisfaction with Kirk's performance. "I thank you." Then he bent to retrieve his own weapon and claim a disruptor.

Kirk's eyes sparkled. "Crude...but effective," he quipped and thrust the knife back into his belt in case he needed it later. He took two disruptors from the dead Klingons and felt the confidence a well-armed warrior knows.

By Kirk's reckoning only Kell, his subordinate, and three other Klingons remained, besides Korvath and his androids. He spotted two elevators in the corridor crossing theirs. "This way..." he called.

The descent into the mines seemed agonizingly slow. The two men hugged the sides of the elevator car as the doors opened on the lowest level. Kirk winked at his armored comrade and gingerly tossed the knife outside. It clattered across the polished floor.

They heard an android challenge, "Who comes?" Lord Cam fired a disruptor burst to cover Kirk who, crouching in the doorway, caught two more automatons as they ran towards the sounds of fighting.

They left the safety of the lift and found themselves in a durasteel, air-filtered, brightly illuminated corridor. Clearly Klingon engineers had worked here. "This must be it," Kirk thought aloud.

The Starlord nodded shortly. "We must be swift."

Kirk waved him forward and together they ran ahead, carefully but swiftly, past the several doorways. He could hear the hushed sound of automation.

"Cam..." Kirk began to speak and then realized the Starlord was not with him. He glanced back and saw the Protectorate Lord stripping something from an android's arm. "Cam!" His voice was full of urgency. The Starlord vaulted towards him, fastening a gorgon head bracelet to his arm as he ran. Kirk realized he knew to whom the bracelet belonged.

"It's up ahead. Ready?"

Together they rushed the door but it was sealed tight and there was no visible control to open it.

"We'll be too noisy if we blast through..." Kirk muttered.

The Starlord swept him back with one arm. Kirk saw him adjust something on his small weapon and lay it against the door. He drew Kirk into the nearest doorway with him and shielded the human with his armored back.

The blast reverberated in the hallway. Kirk felt he had gone deaf until he heard the Starlord order, "Set the disruptor on maximum! There must be no chance of failure!"

Kirk plunged through the still smoldering hole created by the Protectorate weapon. Once through, he stood within another room lined with machinery. Spock, he knew, would have been impressed.

The thought brought Kirk out of his lethargy. He set the disruptor on a slow overload and placed it firmly on top of the computer. "This is from Spock," he said and wished he could create a dread within the bloodless machine that had destroyed his friend with such abandon.

Then Kirk was outside the computer room and running up the corridor. He hesitated only long enough to pick up the small knife that lay before the elevators. For some reason, he was reluctant to relinquish it. He shouted for the Starlord as he realized they had gotten separated.

Then Kirk saw him far down the intersecting hall, blasting doors with his captured disruptor. Kirk shook his head and ran toward him. "Cam, come on!"

The Starlord waved him off and blasted another door. "Go on, Kirk! You have accomplished your mission. Mine remains." He moved swiftly from side-to-side, wordlessly searching.

Kirk was acutely aware of the moments that passed. He was unsure how long it would take the Klingon device to discharge. "Cam, there is no time!"

The Starlord never faltered. His voice carried clearly up the hall. "If it were the Vulcan, Captain, could you leave without him?"

It was all he needed to say. Kirk cast his fate to the whim of whatever god claimed the place and ran to the doors on the other side of the elevator bank, aiming his own weapon at the door there.

He was almost a quarter of the way down the corridor when he heard something. It was further down the hall and muffled by heavy doors, but it was a sound. He listened closely. A voice...it was a voice! "Cam!" he yelled and waved for the Starlord to join him. "Here!"

A door resounded with several thumps. The Starlord leaned against it. "Brek?" $\,$

The voice came through the door with muffled disbelief. "My Lord? Cam, is that you?"

"Step back!" Lord Cam ordered. His disruptor blew the door open. The Starlord stepped through and caught the arms that reached for him. Kirk

chanced a look from the doorway, still keeping an eye on the elevators that were the only exit.

"Brek, you are unharmed?" The gray eyes searched him.

"Yes, My Lord." He smiled in an effort to reassure.

"But you did not use the drug...and all this time it was my only comfort."

"Cam, we've got to get out of here!" Kirk's teeth were clenched.

The Protectorate Lord nodded and they joined him. "We have set a charge to destroy the computer," he explained to his Counselor as he handed him the bracelet from his arm.

Brek put it on and the green eyes snapped. He had heard the distant sounds of battle and longed to join it. Kirk was shoving something into his hands. "Here, take this..."

The Counselor shook his head. "My savager was forfeit at my capture. I cannot take your defense."

The starship captain brandished the silver blade that had become a comfort to him. "I still have a weapon, Counselor! Let's go!" He saw the flash of gratitude in the Starlord's dark eyes. They moved back up the hall to the elevators at breakneck speed.

But when the lift opened four Klingons stepped out, weapons ready, searching. Brek shot one down instantly, Cam another, as they took refuge together in a doorway. The Starlord fired one more burst from his disruptor and moved up the hall as the remaining pair of Klingons split up. He fired again. Brek moved up, covering Kirk's advance on the opposite side of the corridor.

One Klingon ran for a better firing position and Cam's blast missed him. Brek ran for the nearest elevator under his commander's covering fire. A Klingon blast hit close and the Counselor spun to the floor in the open doorway that was their means of escape.

Kirk saw the Klingon's death written in the Starlord's eyes. Lord Cam fired and fired again, and did not miss. He got in the elevator, pulled his Counselor into the safety of the waiting car and held the door with his foot as he fired sporadic bursts to give Kirk time to move.

The starship captain crossed the hallway to a door, but could not locate the remaining Klingon. Taking a deep breath, he ran for the lift. The Klingon tackled him just before he reached the door. He used Kirk as a shield against the Starlord.

Their time was gone. To Kirk it had already seemed twice as long as he thought possible. "Cam, go on! Get out of here! Save Brek!"

He saw the Starlord draw a breath and touch the form beside him. "Kirk!" he shouted and tossed a disruptor to him as the doors closed. The weapon landed out of his reach, but Kirk smashed the Klingon's foot with his boot heel and twisted from his grasp. He reached the disruptor and fired as the Klingon jumped for him.

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Cam propped his Counselor's form against one wall as the elevator climbed to the surface. He took the face he had feared never to see again in both his hands. "Brek! Brek! Hear me! We've got to run!"

Eyelids fluttered and in moments emerald eyes were open, trying to focus. "Where is Kirk?"

The Starlord hoped to hide his fear from Brek. "He follows us." He prayed that it was true. "Can you stand?"

The Counselor balanced on weak legs, his commander standing by to steady him. "Yes," he said uncertainly.

"Stay close to me then. We have only one weapon now." $\,$

When the elevator reached the top, its doors opened. An android was waiting to enter but the Starlord fired at it point blank. Then he sent the car back down for Kirk. The second elevator was already down below, bearing what threat to the starship captain Lord Cam could only guess.

The Starlord took long strides and checked the cavern passage ahead. No living being was in sight. He motioned for Brek to follow him. Both men heard arguing voices as they moved out of the cavern.

"But, Kell, they cannot win! There are only two of them! All your men are down below and my androids have joined them. They cannot escape!"

The Klingon spat at the cavern wall and thundered, "The last time you said your machine was inescapable the Vulcan managed it. This time I'm going to make certain, Korvath!"

Lord Cam pressed himself flat against the cross corridor wall. Brek was beside him, breathless. At great cost Kirk had purchased their last chance. Now it would end here. Instinctively, he held Brek back with one arm, shielding him.

The Klingon stomped to the elevator and sent for the car already at the bottom. He grabbed the bald man roughly by the shoulders. "If this ends badly for the Empire, Korvath..."

The gray robes swayed as he trembled. "I am loyal, Kell. I swear!" The Klingon commander sneered and shoved the man away as though he carried a bad odor.

Then they heard it, far beneath them. A rumbling thunder as if some ancient god had spent his night in restless slumber. "What is that?" Kell yelled at the cringing inventor. "What is happening?"

Brek gripped the Starlord's arm and signalled with his eyes. The second set of elevator doors

was opening...Kirk!

From his hiding place, Lord Cam fired at the Klingon. Kell's disruptor blast blew away the car's controls as he fell without a sound at Kirk's feet.

The cavern trembled, dust filled the air, lights shorted out above their heads. Korvath screamed, "No! My work! My computer!" He clung to the cavern wall and pounded at the switch for the other elevator.

He was unarmed; the three allies ignored him. They ran for the entrance of the cavern.

Kirk looked back for one brief second. He saw the elevator's doors open and Korvath, in a panic to save his machine, step through them...into oblivion. The circuits had failed. There had been no waiting car. Kirk heard Korvath scream all the way to the bottom of the shaft.

The cavern walls shuddered in collapse as they ran out of the choking dust cloud into the light of dawn. Nothing moved but the three figures walking beneath the reborn sky.

"It is ended, My Lord." Brek steadied himself on his leader's arm.

Lord Cam nodded his head. The Klingons were dead. What androids had not been destroyed had ceased to function when the computer's control had stopped. There were some within their view, standing motionless and haunting; others had fallen over on their sides in mid-stride.

Kirk recalled his first impression of them. He recalled too much. "Yes, it's over," he said tonelessly.

The Starlord saw the drained look on his face. He brushed the dust from the captain's shoulders and guided him gently toward a nearby boulder. "Sit here. You fought like three men, but you are only one. Rest. You have earned it." He noticed the silver knife still resting in Kirk's hand, forgotten.

Brek called the Starlord away. Though they stood some distance from him -- Cam's hand on his Counselor's shoulder, the gray eyes meeting the green -- Kirk was aware of them talking together in hushed tones.

After a time, while the Counselor ran off in the direction of the complex, the Starlord came back to where Kirk waited. If he had not been so exhausted, Kirk might have noticed the concern in the eyes that watched him.

"Where's Brek going?" he asked without much interest. It gave him something to say and occupied his thoughts.

"He believes the complex functions on a separate power source. If so, he will contact our ships."

"The Klingons may be monitoring the transmissions." $% \begin{center} \begin{cen$

"True, but they will not challenge both a Federation starship and a Protectorate galleon at one time to claim a lost cause."

Kirk smiled a grim acknowledgment. "They are quick to claim victories, but they do not like to lose."

"They have lost this day." The Starlord touched his shoulder sympathetically. He saw the Federation officer wavering in fatigue and knew despair would follow quickly after the brief euphoria of victory.

Kirk looked up at the man who had saved his life at least twice in the short time they had known each other. "I owe you a considerable debt, Cam."

The Starlord smiled warmly. "You owe me nothing. You took me as an untested ally, you fought beside me like another Starlord, and you risked your life to bring Brek back to me." His eyes said more than his words. "You are a mighty ally, Kirk!"

The starship captain ducked his head. He did not feel so mighty. His muscles ached, his bruises hurt, and his heart was sore. "You're an impressive ally yourself."

The Starlord laughed. The sound warmed Kirk's heart despite his melancholy. "When a Starlord celebrates victory with an ally in my work, they make exchange of gifts. What would you have?"

A shadow fell on Kirk's heart. Out of it all there had come only death. "I'm afraid you couldn't give me what I'd like the most, Cam."

The Starlord knelt beside him and looked into the tired eyes sick with grief. "Are you so certain?" he asked. The hand that touched Kirk's gestured back to the complex where two figures were walking slowly towards them.

Kirk shielded his eyes against the morning light. He caught a glimpse of a Starfleet uniform and a certain, well-known gait. He shot to his feet and looked at the man standing next to him with astonishment. "It's not possible! He was dead!"

The Starlord shook his head. "You had little time to check him closely."

Kirk's head shook slowly from side to side. "You don't have the power to..."

Cam smiled. "No, but we do have the drug I mentioned." He took a tiny vial of blue liquid from his belt. "We call it 'Magic Death' for so it becomes when swallowed. It reduces a body's functions to their most minimal and maintains that level for the duration of a starday. If the restorant," he produced another vial of colorless liquid, "is not administered within that time, it becomes a true poison and all life ceases."

Kirk felt his equilibrium failing. "I don't understand. How did you...when..."

The Starlord put the vials away and reseated Kirk on the boulder. The man had been pushed to

limits beyond endurance. Cam explained carefully. "Brek was watching the monitor when he saw Spock's decision to end his life. He has long admired the Vulcans, and the loss of life, except in a duel of honor or in warfare, is abhorrent to our race. He hoped that by giving Spock his drug, Korvath's machine would prove ineffective, and the drug would render Spock's mind inaccessible to the device. He hoped the confusion would provide him a chance for further action and, if all else failed, he knew that the promise of your friend's restoration would bring you to me as an ally."

"I did not know myself until moments ago when Brek left to give him the restorant. He had attempted to tell me when he was captured." The recollection of Kirk's tear-stained face came back to him. "If I had known, I would not have let you suffer."

Kirk rose again, more steadily this time, the color returning to his cheeks as the figures drew closer. "If you hadn't done this, we'd both be dead by now and Korvath would have handed the Federation to the Klingons like a stolen jewel. I don't know how to thank you." The hazel eyes shone with a light from deep within.

The Starlord waved the arm with the dragon bracelet. "I take no credit for this. Your gratitude should go to Brek. He did it all to guarantee my safety and to guard the Protectorate."

The captain was no longer listening. The Vulcan first officer was only yards away, still quietly conversing with the Protectorate Counselor. Kirk walked away from the Starlord. He could not see Cam wave to his Counselor to leave the Vulcan and join him.

Kirk could not be certain if the expression on the angular visage softened as he approached. He thought it did. He thought the black eyes grew brighter but could not tell, for his own eyes flooded. He became suddenly aware of the knife in his hand and put it quickly through his belt.

The sound of the deep voice moved him with one word. "Jim..."

Kirk caught the Vulcan's arms and shook him slightly, as if to prove to himself that this was no dream from which he might awaken, still bereft. "Spock..." He choked on the name, then threw back his head and laughed it out with a joyful cry of resurrection. Spock! Thank God you're all right!"

The Vulcan's hands came up to his captain's shoulders. His eyes showed his concern. "You are unharmed, Captain? Brek tells me all is well."

Kirk blinked the tears away. "Yes, Spock, everything's all right...now." He stepped back and looked the Vulcan over, pointing to his side. "Your wound?"

"During my...suspension...it has nearly healed, Captain. Brek struck my arm before I could complete the stroke. His blow dissipated most of the force of my own. It was a minor wound."

Kirk's face was solemn. "Not to me." He looked the Vulcan squarely in the eyes, to let him see all the suffering in his own. "How could you do it, Spock...to yourself, to me?"

Spock almost winced under the gaze which told so much. "Understand, Jim, it was...violation, betrayal. It was a matter of honor, and of duty. I had no desire to cause you pain."

Kirk shook his head and laid a hand on the Vulcan's shoulder in a bid for strength. "Spock, after all our years together," he caught the Vulcan watching him with velvet eyes, "after all we've shared... how could you believe your death would not bring me pain?" The Vulcan took his eyes away. "Whatever the reason, Spock, however logical it was." He held the letter in his free hand. "It was still loss, Spock." The tears were in his voice now. "It was a loss I found very hard to bear."

The moment passed. Kirk let Spock go and waited for his heart to stop its thundering. The Vulcan regained his composure too, though not entirely. He watched Kirk conceal the letter once again, and his voice was very soft, like the breeze moving over the sand. "You kept it?"

Kirk looked up quickly. "Of course I did. It was all you left me. That..." he touched the silver knife, "and this."

No muscle moved in the Vulcan's bony face. No eyebrow lifted, but there was a strange light in his eyes.

Kirk turned and walked back towards his allies. He stopped before the Counselor. "I have you to thank for Spock's life. I know of no way to repay you."

Brek smiled his golden smile and dipped his head at Kirk's compliment. "It was my honor, Captain. You fought beside my lord when I could not. It is enough."

The Starlord smiled at Brek's graceful words. Then he spoke to Kirk. "Brek sent our ships word to come for us. The *Aldebaran* will be here before long."

Kirk nodded, reluctant to see them go.

"Now, for that exchange of gifts I mentioned..."

Kirk held up a hand in restraint and gestured with it toward his Vulcan officer. "I have my gift."

"No. That gift is Brek's. This is mine."
The Starlord held his right hand out before him,
palm up. "Well met," Kirk sensed the ritual as Lord
Cam brought the hand back over his chest and took
the medallion from around his neck, "and well remembered. Take this gift as a symbol of our friendship. When you seek the Protectorate, wear this.
You will be welcome." He laid the heavy pendant in



Kirk's hand and smiled. "I should like you to see our world, Kirk."

The starship captain returned the smile. "I think I would. Perhaps on our next leave, if I could persuade Spock to help me plot a star map..."

Spock nodded. "I already have some rough idea of the star system's location..." $% \begin{center} \end{center} \begin{center} \begin{center}$

Brek's green eyes sparkled at the thought. "Would you come with him, Spock? I should like to speak of Vulcan poets with you."

Spock tilted his head to one side. "Where he goes, I shall go also." $\,$

The Counselor smiled in understanding.

Kirk felt regret that he had nothing to give the Starlord in return. Then it came to him. He held out the ornate silver knife in his open palm. "Would you accept this, Cam? It has served me well ...like a trusted friend." He cast a sideways glance at the Vulcan. "I won't need it now."

The Starlord bowed formally and took the knife. "I am honored," he said, and thrust it into his own belt as naturally as though it belonged there.

Kirk heard a single, musical note and watched the Starlord twist the dragon head of his bracelet in reply. "The *Aldebaran* approaches. We must set out for our departure point."

Kirk felt a stab of regret at losing them so soon. Still, he sensed with a certain pride that an important bond had formed amid the death and deceit of Korvath's world.

Brek turned to Spock and repeated the Starlord's ritual. "Well met and well remembered, Spock. May you serve best where your heart serves freely."

The Vulcan eyes recognized something they saw in the emerald ones. Spock's hand formed the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Brek, in the service of your Starborn Lord."

Brek's eyes grew wide with renewed awe. "You know our old poets, Spock?"

"Some fragments only, from an ancient cultural contact." $\footnote{\cite{contact}}$

The Starlord waited as his Counselor joined him. He raised the knife and called, "I look forward to our next meeting, Captain Kirk!"

Spock nodded a respectful farewell and moved beside his captain. Kirk waved goodbye as the medallion rested heavily in his other hand. They watched them disappear, side by side, armor shining, over the rocky hillside.

Kirk saw Spock eyeing the medallion with his usual curiosity and handed it to him. He basked in the secure glow of the Vulcan's presence. "What was that I heard you quote about a 'Starborn Lord', Spock?"

The Vulcan was peering with great interest at the figured pendant. "One particular fragment from their poetry always intrigued me, Captain." He quoted with deliberate eloquence:

"...Behold the Starborn...bred in the fire of the heavens, heir to the splendor of the galaxy, Lord of the Stars, prince among men..."

Kirk nodded, looking after them. "Yes, he was that."

"Captain, were you serious about visiting their world sometime?" $% \begin{center} \begin{cente$

Kirk shot a startled look at the Vulcan. "Yes, Spock, I was. Why? Don't you think we can work out a star chart of that magnitude?"

The dark head leaned to one side. "I believe it would have presented some difficulty." He gestured to the markings on the medallion which dangled from his hand. The smile was only in his eyes. "However, I think Lord Cam has thoughtfully provided you with a star map already, Captain." The medallion reflected the brilliant light of day back into the starship captain's dazzled eyes.

Thoughts on a Paradise Lost By 1726

by merlin znomas

T could tell by
his voice
when he said
"for the first time
in my life I was
happy"
That he meant it.

He sounded so regretful although he will deny it meant anything to him.

Yust a new, unique experience

To belong.

Why did I have
to be
the one to
force his return? I
was the voice of
logic.
Tables turned, my friend.

Perhaps I should have begun with Scotty, MCoy, Sulu? I started with my best friend. That he should leave Paradise with me

Will you be angry?

He was behaving as

McCoy wanted

unrestrained, human behavior

looked so strange on

him, how happy, how

illogical

Now I know how he sees us!

leaving was much easier for me nothing there for me. No adventure, only farm work, order and peace

No special woman either:

He was so relaxed so happy he didn't want to leave for duty nor for me. That hurt

Shared hardships cement friendships.

Kicked out of Paradise
first time
walked out second time
at my insistance! You'll
notice a very big difference

Who am I, God?

Rather, the serpent to the crew for they did no evil, the opposite — perfect, peaceful and contented slaves.

They had no choice.

Do I really believe my statement man must always fight something in order to broaress, in order to

yes.

Paradise could only exist for us if the whole galaxy were constant and peaceful. Stagnant, unchanging worlds invite Klingons

False Paradises abound

This is getting rather too philosophical Back to work.

Yet I wish, he could have stayed, a bit longer

The next Paradise maybe?

DREAMBREAKER

Joy Mancinelli

Spock stood motionless, gazing out of the dingy window into the darkness. Hours had passed since the screech of brakes in a dirty street should have snuffed out the life of a gallant and beautiful woman. In his mind he saw again the bright headlights rushing towards him, the sickening moment of stunned disbelief, then the frenzied flurry of motion. McCoy had wrenched himself from Kirk's grasp as an old woman's loud call rang out above the excited buzz of horrified voices.

"Hey! She ain't dead!"

A collective sigh of relief rippled through the onlookers. Kirk's eyes widened with hope.

"Somebody git a doctor," the cry was taken up. "Quick!" $\,$

No arms in the galaxy could have held Leonard McCoy back. He plunged into the rapidly gathering crowd, and elbowed his way to the pathetically crumpled heap that was Edith Keeler.

With an incredulous shout of "Oh, my God! She isn't dead!" Kirk jerked free from the Vulcan's restraining grasp, raced across the road to kneel beside her until the wail of the approaching sirens split the night.

And now the first traffic of early morning began to fill the dawn-washed street. Spock watched without seeing. Kirk and McCoy must both have gone to the hospital, for he had seen neither since the ambulance, lights flashing, had shrieked away into the gloom. When the crowd had dispersed, he'd

walked slowly back to the drab room. He'd flexed his cold-stiffened hands before bending over the laboriously constructed sprawl of complex circuits that snaked untidily across the room. Uncounted hours of drudgery had paid for the parts to provide them with that short glimpse into the arcane web of the future...a glimpse that was a warning that only he seemed to remember.

Edith Keeler should have died tonight.

Perhaps there had been a mistake. Perhaps their continued presence in this primitive period had already disrupted the flow of events, changed the pattern of the time-to-come, provided unseen alternatives to what should have been. He permitted himself the human luxury of hope and set about replacing the burnt-out components. Electric power flowed into vacuum tubes and condensers, wire heated and expanded with faint cracklings and the distinctive warm smell of the humming machinery filled the room. Sure fingers made minute adjustments to the wires, eyes scanned the flickering images. Check and double check. Until there was no possibility of error. Until there was no cause for hope.

Spock's silent vigil was ended by the slamming of the door. James Kirk burst in, the joy that suffused his face a strange contrast to the tears that suddenly overflowed and ran unchecked. Words choked over the lump in his throat.

"She's going to be all right." As reaction set in every limb shuddered and he slumped into the

nearest chair, hands covering his face. Spock held back, afraid to intrude on the other's pain. Kirk looked up and misinterpreted the Vulcan's reticence. He dragged his sleeve over his eyes, managed a weak grin. "Sorry about that, Spock."

"I am pleased to hear..." the lie-that-wouldn't-have-been-a-lie faltered on his lips. Surely Jim couldn't have been so involved with the woman that he had forgotten?

But Kirk hadn't even heard him. He was rushing on eagerly. "Thank God for Bones! If he hadn't been right there to stop the bleeding..." his voice shook with remembered horror, "she'd only have lasted a few minutes."

As she was supposed to do. The words clamoured in his brain but he said nothing. Logic demanded that he remind his captain of their precarious existence in this world, but somehow the sentences would not form.

"They didn't let me go into her room." Kirk's head drooped and he shook it impatiently. "Got to go back tonight. Regular visiting hours. Four o'clock. See her then." Exhausted, he closed his eyes and trembled with a nervous chill.

"Let me help." Spock was at his side, easing the limp form carefully on to the bed. Before he had finished removing the shoes and pulling up the thin blanket, Kirk was asleep.

At his side always. The ghostly words echoed in his mind as the First Officer of the Enterprise stared down at the man who meant more to him than any other being in the galaxy. Tousled head pillowed on outflung arm, the now-dried stains on his cheeks silent witness to his ordeal. Sleep smoothed away the heartaches and Kirk looked young and far too vulnerable. Spock watched the even rise and fall of the human's breathing for a minute, then quietly left the room, pulling the door softly closed behind him. The shining happiness in the hazel eyes had both unsettled and confused him. Otherwise how could he have ignored his obvious duty to point out the consequences of McCoy's intervention?

The front door banged as he descended the stairs. The doctor stamped across the hall, leaving a trail of wet footprints on the scrubbed wood.

"You hear the news, Spock?" He peered over the damp brown paper bag he was carrying. "They think Edith's gonna be just fine. Lost a lot of blood of course, but she's doing okay."

The Vulcan stared stonily at him. "Dr. McCoy, I must speak with you." $\,$

"Well, don't turn any cartwheels for joy," McCoy muttered, annoyed at the other's seeming lack of interest in his news. "All right, all right. But come into my room. Got to put these down before the bottom falls out of the bag." He sneezed twice and added gloomily, "and get out of these wet clothes before I catch my death of cold."

Spock winced at the choice of words, but obediently followed the still grumbling doctor back to

the Mission and into the bare room where Edith had nursed him. A thin drizzle beat against the panes, smearing the ever-present city grime.

"Well, Spock?" McCoy thrust his head into a woolly shirt several sizes too big for him and rolled back the cuffs. "Don't know where she gets all these from. But beggars can't be...there. That's not too bad. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"There is something that the captain must be told. It will be very painful to him, therefore it would probably be more appropriate for you to discuss the matter with him. Your training has given you more experience than me in dealing with such emotions." The stiff phrases, the expressionless voice gave no hint of the inner turmoil. "It concerns Miss Keeler."

McCoy peered at him suspiciously. "What about her? Get on with it, Spock. I'm out on my feet."

The Vulcan paused. "Dr. McCoy, it is absolutely imperative that Edith Keeler does not survive this accident."

McCoy froze, stared in total disbelief. "I don't think I heard you rightly. Sure, the girl is hurt. She's hurt badly. But she isn't going to die from those injuries. Not now."

"Doctor!" Unaccustomed urgency tinged the harsh voice. "You must understand why we are here." Briefly, concisely, waving aside McCoy's attempted interruption, he related what had happened at the Guardian, and how he and Kirk had taken the calculated risk of going back in time to locate the dangerously hallucinating physician. "Do you comprehend?" he asked at last, emphasising his words. "Edith Keeler must not live. If she does, it means the end of time as we know it. There will be no place for us; our world will not exist."

"Oh, come on, Spock. That's kinda melodramatic. Are you sure? One woman is the key to all that?"

Spock nodded sombrely.

"Ah!" McCoy turned angrily, slamming his hand against the wall. "I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it. There must be another way." He whirled back to the Vulcan. "If it makes any difference to you, Jim's in love with her."

"I am aware of that."

"So maybe if they got married? You know, Spock," he sounded pleading, as though begging fate in the form of the first officer to produce a future in which they could all live happily ever after, "if they love each other that much, maybe she'd settle down to raisin' kids instead of working for all these causes you told me about."

"Doctor McCoy," Spock's tone was cold, barely patient, "kindly curb your romantic fantasies. This is not our world and there are no alternatives. We cannot take the risk of remaining here. I have explored the possibilities most thoroughly."

"I'll just bet you have," McCoy muttered.

The ticking of the cheap alarm clock and the mournful patter of the rain filled the room.

"Hey, wait a minute. You're a Vulcan! Use that mind meld of yours. That would solve it."

Spock started under the fierceness of the accusation. "In what way? Have I overlooked something?"

"Why, sure," McCoy rushed on early. "You've linked with Jim before. Why not with Edith? Take all of this," he waved vaguely around, encompassing the whole mission building, "out of her memory."

"You do not know what you are suggesting." Spock was appalled.

"What's the matter, Spock? Did I offend your precious Vulcan sense of propriety? That way everybody could..."

"Be silent!" The command cut across the doctor's rationalization. Was it worth explaining? And why did McCoy have to bring it up? He'd thought of it, of course, though every fibre of his being revolted against the idea of tampering with another's mind. Two others. Three. Because it would-n't just be Edith's memories. Neither Kirk nor his Chief Medical Officer possessed the mental disciplines to guard against a false word or action that would give them away. To erase so much was almost impossible. One error, one miscalculation, and only an empty, mindless husk would remain. Leave them their full memories? Too dangerous, even if it didn't mean that it automatically condemned them to this Earth, this time. That was no solution to their predicament, though it might secure a few years of happiness for James Kirk. It was a measure of Spock's feeling for the man that he'd even considered it. And in that night of agony he'd considered everything that might buy happiness, a future, for James Kirk. To cover his own weakness he was harsher than he intended. "No. It is unthinkable," he said sharply. "There is no other choice. Miss Keeler should not have survived the accident last night. Do I make myself clear, Doctor? She must not survive."

Silence fell. McCoy clenched his fists, then said sarcastically, "I assume you have your facts correct. Am I also to assume that you have appointed yourself as chief executioner?"

Hurt reflected briefly in the alien eyes.

"Oh, shit. My goddam temper," McCoy groaned.
"Look. I didn't mean it, Spock. It's just that I
...well..." he hesitated. "I'm a healer, for God's
sake, not a...." A single obscenity escaped his
lips.

The Vulcan stood immobile, withdrawn, waiting for him to finish. "I am no more enamoured of the solution that you are, Dr. McCoy."

"Yeah, I guess." McCoy sounded defeated, resigned. "Have you thought...how can we...I mean there are others in the ward and...and we'll need time to get clear. To get back here...you know...

to the machinery."

"There are Vulcan techniques," Spock answered heavily.

"Yes, I suppose there would be," McCoy said dryly, glancing at the clock. "But the final decision has to be Jim's." He peered closely at the Vulcan. The sallow features seemed paler than usual, the lines around the mouth etched deeply, the dark eyes hooded, guarded. "Spock? Are you going to be all right?"

The Vulcan nodded shortly, turned away.

"Well then," McCoy went on, "we can't do anything for a few hours. We won't be able to get back in to see her until visiting hours and there's no use drawing attention to ourselves. Go back to your room and try to get some rest. I'll set the alarm for..."

"There is no need. I shall not sleep."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Spock ignored the question. "I shall awaken you in five hours time," he stated evenly and slipped out of the room as the older man lay down on the narrow, lumpy cot.

Strange, Spock mused, how an illogical human is able to accept a logical action more easily than I. He sighed, caught himself, and returned to the rooming house to wait.

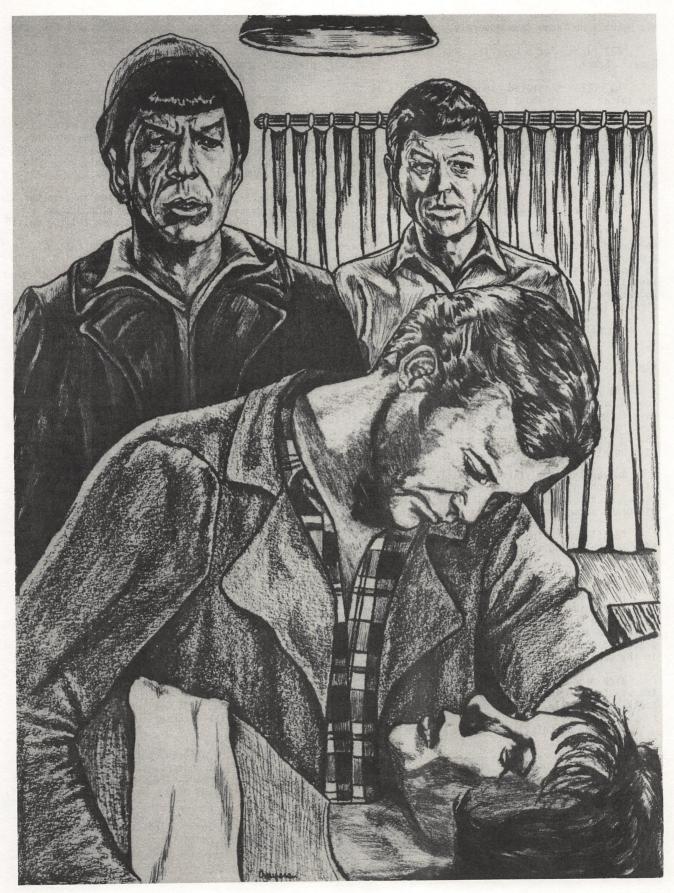
A watery sun had broken through the clouds and touched the drab room with streaks of gold. Kirk came slowly back to consciousness, drifting luxuriously, unable to identify immediately the reason for the deep sense of well-being that filled him. A moment passed and he realized that it was the soft click of the door that had roused him. The room sprang abruptly into focus and he caught sight of his two friends.

"How is she?" He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "Is there any news from the hospital? Is she all right?" The questions tumbled out.

"There has been no communication from the hospital, Captain."

"Oh, well, that's okay. No news is supposed to be good news. Hey, will you look at the time! I told the nurse to let Edith know that I'd be back at visiting hours. Weird way to run a sickbay." He grinned at McCoy. "And we've got to eat. Don't know about you two, but I'm starving. How come you both are looking so solemn?" He stared down at his shirt with the rusty stains of cheated death. "Ugh!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Didn't even think about cleaning up last night." He ripped it off, slung it carelessly into the corner, humming as he rummaged through the drawer for clean clothes.

McCoy and Spock exchanged uncomfortable looks. Kirk didn't let them say a word. The doctor cleared his throat and Kirk turned, becoming aware of the unnatural silence. A twinge of fear clutched



his heart. He faced them squarely.

"All right, let's have it. What's wrong? Bones? Spock?"

The doctor hesitated, looked uncertainly at the Vulcan. "It's about Edith."

"I gathered that. Go ahead."

There was another horribly drawn-out silence. "Spock says she's got to die," McCoy said desperately, and the bald statement trembled in the small stuffy room.

"What the hell...Spock?"

"Edith Keeler must not be permitted to live." He forced himself to meet those stricken eyes, drew a deep breath and continued. "Otherwise there is no hope for this culture. Or for ours. It all hinges on this one accident." His eyes begged for understanding. "Jim, she should not have lived through last night."

The silence stretched between them.

"We seem to have no choice," McCoy added gently.

The youthfulness drained from Kirk's face. He looked haggard, strained. "Dear God, how could I have forgotten?" he whispered guiltily. "I guess I just hoped we had been given a little more time. I was so happy that she...." He broke off abruptly, covered his face.

Awkwardly McCoy started forward, but Spock's light touch on his shoulder restrained him. Kirk turned back to them, eyes bleak. The hammering of his heart seemed uncannily loud in the silence.

"Gentlemen." The formality was a refuge. "We have some planning to do." $\ensuremath{\mathsf{N}}$

They didn't break the silence as they journeyed down across the city, jostled by the milling crowds in the rush hour traffic, grateful for the anonymity it afforded, and for the noise and bustle that precluded conversation. Each man was locked tight in the desolation of his own thoughts.

Kirk made enquiries at the desk and then led the way towards the bank of elevators. He touched Spock's arm gently, met the dark eyes.

"Can you do this?" His voice was the barest whisper.

Spock nodded once. "I must."

"Yes." His hand dropped and he pressed the call button beside the double doors. "Give me five minutes," he said quietly, and left them standing in the tiled corridor that smelled of disinfectant and floor wax and the peculiar, indefinable odour of human suffering.

"Hell of a thing," McCoy mumbled, watching the slow hands of the clock crawl around the dial. In the comings and goings of the busy hall they were blessedly unnoticed. The seconds stretched out, the minutes dragged.

Wordlessly, Spock summoned the elevator and they rose in silence to the fifth floor, pushed open the swinging doors and entered the ward. The only privacy was afforded by the screens marking off sections of the room. Within one, Kirk sat on a straight-backed chair next to Edith's bed, holding her hand in his.

"Why, Mr. Spock!" Even pale and in pain her vitality seemed to fill the space around them. "How nice of you to come. Jim's been telling me..."

Spock's thoughts whirled. I have killed before. But not like this. Part of him cried out in agony. Not like this! Control. Control! Jim must understand. He'll remember Gary Mitchell. Duty forced him to kill then. But I...a Vulcan... to slaughter another....

He'd missed what she had said.

"...still be playing when I get out of here," and she smiled up at him.

"Spock?" Kirk's pleading whisper reached through his indecision.

Grief-laden he bent over the slight figure.
"I am sorry," Spock muttered and strong fingers pressed the shoulder. She sagged unconscious into the haven of Kirk's arms. Self-loathing surged through him even as Spock felt for the exact spot at the side of the slender neck and exerted pressure. The lashes barely fluttered on her cheeks, and there was a quiet rush of breath as life ended.

A man whose personal creed was non-violence murders a woman who had lived for love and peace and the galaxy is saved. The irony was not wasted on him. Tenderly he laid the work-hardened hand back on he sheet, forced a steadiness into his step as he left the ward. A few moments later Kirk joined them, set face brooking no questions.

They faced each other over the complicated tangle of tubes and wires. The Vulcan made some last tiny adjustments and turned to the others.

"It is ready." It was impossible to meet their eyes and the condemnation he dreaded finding there.

A soft voice offered comfort. "We did what had to be done. I understand, and...and I think she does too." A hand stretched out to touch, give strength. "Let's go home. We've bought our future, Mr. Spock."

And as the room swirled and dissolved around them, the Vulcan heard the dim, weary words, "And only we three will ever know at what price."

Tit For Tat

ROBERTA ROGOW

The Klingon starship lurched violently as, per the request from Commissioner Nils Barris and Station Commander Lurry, it sped away from Space Station K-7. The jolt threw Captain Koloth and his lieutenant, Korax, out of their seats. As he picked himself up off the deck, Koloth wondered if his "oppo" Kirk ever had the same trouble with undertrained and overenthusiastic engineering staff. Probably not, Koloth decided glumly; Earthers overload their ships with all kinds of fail-safe mechanisms so that even a plebe can run them.

Kerash, the chief engineer, called apologetically from the engine room, taking Koloth away from his distressing thoughts on their recent debacle on Station K-7. "I regret the roughness of the ride, sir. You did say that we were to leave the station speedily. And I had to get those -- er -- THINGS -- out of our engines."

"When I said leave with speed, I did not mean that you were to toss us about like a chip in the water," Koloth complained. He blinked at the viewscreen. "Where ARE we?"

Kerash cleared his throat. "We -- we ran into the residue from a Black Star, sir. What happened to us is the same thing the Federation engineer, Scott, described to me as a slingshot effect." He backtracked, explaining, "--Er, before the fight he was boasting of his ship --"

Lieutenant Korax ground his teeth. "Never mind the fight," he gritted out. "Answer Captain Koloth, Engineer. Where are we? I don't recognize any of these stars."

"They -- they're not from the Empire's sphere of influence," Kerash stammered. "In point of fact we are orbiting Earth --"

"EARTH!!! Deflectors up! Prepare to mount --" Koloth began to shout orders. The navigator leaped to his console. Kerash spoke again.

Korax spoke up from his viewscreen. "There is a small satellite approaching. Earth-script letters R-C-A. It appears to be harmless; perhaps it is a communications device."

"Get rid of it," ordered Koloth. With one blast from the sonic disruptors, the Comsat vanished. Koloth muttered, "That looked like an antique. What are the Earthers doing, setting up another of their everlasting cultural exhibits?"

Kerash's voice sounded more and more unhappy, even filtered through the ship's intercom, as he answered. "The communications device was not an antique, sir. WE are the ones who are out of place. According to Engineer Scott, a slingshot effect propels a ship through Time as well as Space. We are orbiting Earth, it is true, but by their peculiar time system, the year is 1979. To state the obvious, we have gone back in Time."

Koloth closed his eyes. Here was the ultimate

opportunity to conquer Earth for the Klingon Empire, and he could do nothing about it. At this moment there was no Empire, only a few recently colonized planets on the opposite side of the galaxy. He opened his eyes and focused on the face of the miserable engineer on the screen. His miscalculations were responsible for this mess. When they got back to the Empire -- Koloth rephrased it, IF they got back to the Empire, he would see to it personally that Kerash found himself shoveling baghra-dung into the furnaces of the Outer Colonial Steel Mills--

Korax coughed. "Captain, what are we going to do?" $\,$

Koloth smiled nastily. "Engineer Kerash," he said into the intercom. "By any chance, did the Earther tell you the means by which he and his crew returned to their proper time and space since they obviously came back and used you and the crew for playthings on that station."

"Yes, sir. He was most expansive about the matter. He considered it one of his triumphs, and I took the liberty of recording his remarks on the chance that they might come in useful."

Koloth perked up. "You are beginning to show some glimmerings of intelligence, Engineer. Perhaps I won't send you to the dungheaps after all. How do we get back?"

Kerash consulted his own computerboard and announced, "We can't."

"What do you mean 'we can't'?" Koloth roared.

"Well, sir," the engineer's voice quivered, "first we need a whole new set of dilithium crystals"

"What happened to the ones we have?" Koloth shouted angrily.

"They burned up in the time/space distortion."

Koloth turned to Korax. "Where on this disgusting, primitive planet are we supposed to find dilithium crystals? Earthers are always looking for them, and I can only assume it's because they don't have any at their home base."

Korax replied from the sensor console. "That is not true of this time, Captain. Our sensors detect large outcroppings of dilithium in the irregularly shaped land mass now passing below us. According to our readings, correlated with our data on Earth, the land mass is called North America, and the sector is known as Texas."

"Pinpoint those crystals and correlate with our data on Earth's history. Find out whether those crystals are readily available."

A gentle cough behind him announced the presence of Krib, the official historian, log-keeper, and Imperial representative. "I would advise caution," the white-haired Klingon said softly. As the most senior of the secondary officers, and as the Emperor's blood relative, Krib commanded respect even from Koloth.

"How so?" Koloth asked.

"We do not know much about pre-space era Earth, but we do know that while chaos erupted at the end of their time cycle known as the 20th century, our own Empire was able to form and to expand unchecked. Should we announce ourselves prematurely, there is the possibility that the Earthers might find a way to avert that turmoil and prevent the Empire from existing in our proper time!"

Koloth closed his eyes once more. This was going to be more difficult than he thought. Some how they would have to get those crystals -- either without letting the Earthers know what they wanted them for if they were seen -- or, preferably, in total secrecy.

Korax interrupted his thoughts again. "Captain, we have correlated all the data. Our sensors indicate a sizable outcropping of the crystals on the freeholding of a family called Ewing. Also, we have been able to tap into the Ewing computer banks. This family holds controlling interest in several areas, most notably agriculture and fuel."

Koloth's eyes began to shine. "Fuel! Well! Perhaps we can deal with this Ewing. Have you located the head of the household? I prefer to deal with the leader of the clan."

"The head of the family is absent," Korax replied. "But our sensor probe reports that there is one male person currently in the main building at the freeholding, and the computers indicate that he is entitled to negotiate for the family business interests."

Koloth pulled at his beard. "We can't sit here much longer," he said. "Another of those satellites might come along, and we can't afford to be spotted. Korax, you and that idiot of an engineer will accompany me. Krib, as senior officer of the day, you are in command. I will keep my communicator open so you may monitor the proceedings. If I am successful, we shall be able to return to the Empire. If not -- we will do as much damage to the Earthers here and now as we can."

The Klingon landing party marched to the transporter and beamed down to Earth in a shower of sparks.

amanana

John Ewing, Jr., known to one and all as JR, was lifting a glass of bourbon to his lips as three men suddenly formed in front of him. Carefully he lowered the glass, stared at it, then at the men. He closed his eyes, counted to ten, opened them, and stared with round pebble-colored eyes at the three brawny figures in the weird-looking black-and-silver tunics, black pants and high topped black boots. They were there all right. They didn't go away.

JR set the glass down on the desk-top while he thought very hard about his visitors and where they might have come from. He had had dealings with foreign oilmen from various places on Earth, but while there was something vaguely Levantine about

the sunburned skins and prominent noses of the trio, he couldn't recollect any oil sheikh with double eyebrows. Nor, thought JR as he gazed at them, do I know anyone who comes into my house in a shower of sparkles.

JR reached out a hand and touched Koloth's silver and black over-tunic. Koloth bowed stiffly. JR withdrew his hand, his mind racing wildly. Either I'd better change my brand of bourbon, he thought, or I'd better consider some pretty farout alternatives.

Koloth put on his most winning expression, a sly grin. "I am Koloth," he announced. "This is my first officer Korax, and my chief engineer."

"Pleased to meet you boys," JR said easily, with a wave of the hand that was not holding the drink. He wasn't about to let these bozos know that he was baffled as to their origins and their method of transportation. "You're not from around here," he stated rather than asked.

"We're from --" began Kerash.

"Who we are and where we are from is not important," Koloth said, before his impetuous engineer could give away any strategic secrets. "What is important is that we return to -- to our homeland," he finished lamely.

"Well, what's that got to do with me?" ${\sf JR}$ asked.

"You have what we want," Korax grated out.

"You don't say," JR grinned. He started to pour another drink, then thought better of it. He had mentally eliminated China, Arabia, Africa and the Soviet Union as the "homeland" of his visitors. That didn't leave much else to consider. "You boys want anything to drink?" he asked cheerfully, the perfect host as he turned to face Koloth again.

"No, thank you," Koloth said.

JR sat down in the chair next to the desk and leaned back. "Well, now," he said genially. "What exactly can I do for you? What do you boys need?" He motioned towards two other chairs. The Klingons remained standing. JR's smile broadened. "I take it you're stuck here and can't get back to -- where you came from?"

Koloth bared his teeth. "Precisely, Ewing. That is your name, according to our data. You ARE Ewing?"

"JR Ewing," said the Texan. It was time to take the upper hand with these people. He looked them over, noting Kerash's fascination with the television set and Korax's uneasy glance at the windows. "I'm gonna make a guess. I guess that wherever you're from, it's not here -- Earth, that is. I know we're doing some pretty wild things over in Houston, but not even those government boys could come up with that sparkler that you rode in on."

Korax growled in his throat. "This Earther knows too much already," he whispered to Koloth.

"We should have taken the dilithium without his help."

"We can't do that," Kerash replied in an undertone. "The crystals are probably in their raw state. They might not be easily recognizable. They might even be impacted with another mineral. We must have this Earther's help to locate the crystals and, if necessary, refine them."

JR didn't know what they were talking about but he had a pretty good idea that the skinny little one wanted to dicker and the big one with the ratty beard wanted to push. The slick one, Koloth, spoke for the group.

"You are a very clever person, for an Earther. You are correct. We are not from your planet and we are most anxious to return to our own time and place. But we need to replace certain minerals, which our instruments indicate may be found at this farmholding --"

"We call it a ranch," JR commented.

Koloth waved the interruption aside. "At this ranch, if you prefer. We are willing to trade for them, but we are not adverse to taking them by force."

"Oh, I don't think you'll do that," JR said, rising to his feet. $\,$

"Indeed?" Koloth's eyebrows rose into his hairline.

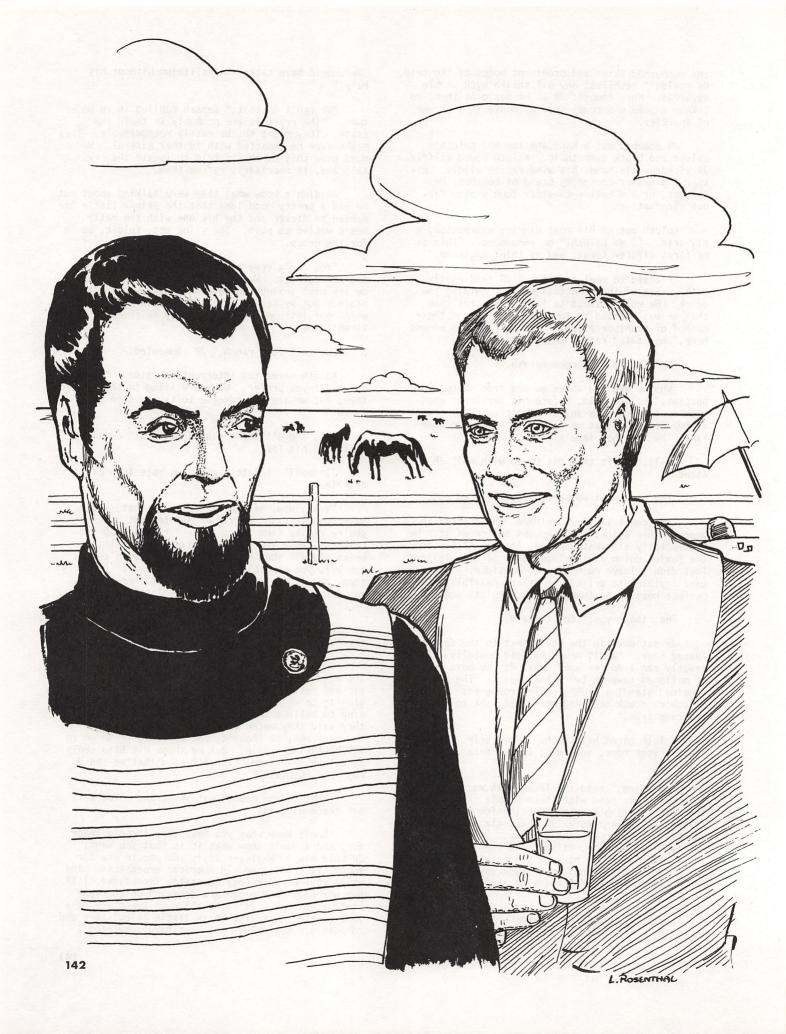
"Well, now, if you wanted to do that, you'd have done it right away," JR pointed out. "If you're really from out there --" he waved at the ceiling, "then you probably have a lot of laser beams and all that stuff. So if you haven't used 'em yet, you probably won't -- that is, IF you have them, and IF you really are from out there. Sure you don't care for a drink, Mr. Koloth?"

"I am Captain Koloth, and I dislike Earther alcohol. Very well. If you are willing, we shall trade."

JR decided he needed the bourbon. After pouring a small amount of the liquor, he took a small sip and rolled it around on his tongue. He was beginning to enjoy this encounter. He was even beginning to believe that these people were exactly what they said they were, visitors from "out there". How many men, he thought, can say they trade on an INTERPLANETARY scale? But he shook his head sadly at Koloth, and said, "I don't know that we can do business, Captain."

"What do you mean?" put in Korax. "You will not trade with us?"

"Don't know what you have that I could trade for, and I don't know what it is that you want," JR told him. "Whatever it is you people use for money, it's not good old American greenbacks. And while your hardware may be pretty impressive, I'll bet our boys in Houston are dreaming up the same stuff right now. It'll be all over the place in a year or two, just like those little calculators and computers. So, unless you boys have something I



can turn into cash, something like gold or diamonds --" JR shrugged and took another sip of bourbon. Koloth spoke into the strangest communications device the Terran had ever seen. His mouth watered at the thought of running a network of those -- after all, look what it had done for Alexander Graham Bell --

The Klingons held a muttered conference. Korax was in favor of sending down a good security team to deal with the recalcitrant Earther.

Kerash protested. "The Earthers are notoriously fragile," he pointed out. "This Ewing might die on us before he told us where the dilithium outcropping is."

"We don't have gold or diamonds on board," Korax stated.

"We do," Koloth amended. "I got some pieces for my First Spouse when I was on the station. But I don't dare return home without a gift for her."

Krib, who had been monitoring the conversation, suggested, "Offer Ewing some of the quadrotriticale we saved from the station."

"Grain? What can he do with that?" Koloth asked.

"The Ewing ranch is a farmholding, is it not? His family has interests in agriculture, and the breeding of meat animals. He will be willing to trade for a high-yield, high-protein feed crop that is unknown to his competitors."

Koloth shrugged. It was worth a try, and they had nothing else to offer. He turned away from the communicator and faced ${\sf JR}$.

"Earther Ewing," Koloth announced.

"Call me JR," the human replied.

"Whatever you please. We have on board our vessel a quantity of grain, developed by our people for a climate much like this one, hot and dry. It is said to produce twice as much flour as other grains, and of a higher quality. It is also said, although I cannot vouch for it since I am neither a farmer nor a nutritionist, that this grain is high in vegetable protein. Would you be interested in trading for a sample of this grain?"

JR blinked. "I'd have to take a look at it first," he hedged.

"We would have to see the minerals," Koloth countered.

JR nodded. "Seems reasonable to me. You know where the rocks you want are?"

Kerash produced a pocket sensor-locator.

"I read dilithium three kilometers from here," the engineer told Koloth.

"Dilithium?" asked JR. "Never heard of that before. What's this stuff look like, anyway?"

Koloth raised an eyebrow at Kerash, who said, "The unformed crystals appear as irregularly shaped opalescent stones, of two or three centimeters in diameter."

"Doesn't sound like anything I've seen here at Southfork." JR complained.

Kerash added, "Dilithium is a form of the mineral you Earthers call quartz."

"And it's rare you say?" JR pursued the thought. "But quartz is so common."

Koloth shrugged. "Not in the form we need. To you it is useless. For our purposes, the mineral is vital."

JR smiled while his brain raced ahead. Whatever dilithium was, these people were willing to trade away their foodcrops for it. Even though Southfork was a ranch, not a farm, JR eagerly saw ways to turn an easy profit. And if everything went well maybe he'd be able to get in touch with these people for further deals --

"Are we going?" urged Kerash. "The ship can't remain in orbit much longer."

"Best to take the jeep," JR decided. He hustled the Klingons out to the carport. Korax wrinkled his nose as the engine revved up.

"Ugh! Fossil fuels!" he spat out.

"I could have the hands saddle up a couple of horses, but the jeep's faster," JR said. "And you did say you were in a hurry."

Koloth glared at Korax. "Control yourself until we get the crystals," he whispered. "We won't have to smell this stink much longer. Think what it would be like to have to remain here indefinitely, breathing in this reek until our lungs were black with it."

Korax subsided. Kerash wished he could examine the ancient vehicle more closely, but put that thought aside. As they bounced along, the engineer waved his pocket sensor, looking for the little blip that would indicate the much-needed mineral was in sight.

The sensor emitted a shrill signal. Kerash yelled in delight, "Over there, near that little stream!" and scrambled out of the jeep to embrace a handful of ordinary-looking pebbles on the banks of a creek, to the astonishment of a number of cows who were taking their afternoon drink.

"That's it?" JR asked, gazing at the pebbles. They looked like milky quartz samples, the sort of thing that edged most of the garden beds, swimming pools and driveways in Dallas. "They are valuable, you say?"

"Valuable to us only," Koloth assured him.
"Our engines must utilize these stones. I am not an engineer, and I cannot explain it to you --" he glared at Kerash who was about to begin a long explanation of the matter/antimatter drive.

The engineer cleared his throat. "Have I Ewing's permission to select those stones which will best suit our equipment?" he asked diffidently. JR waved at the stream bed.

"Go ahead," he said expansively. "Now, let's have a look at that grain of yours, Captain."

There was a humming sound and a shower of sparkles. A small glass vial took shape at Koloth's feet. JR's eyes widened at this novel form of transporation. He picked up the vial and shook some of the contents out onto his hand. He didn't know much about grain, but this stuff looked twice as big as the usual feed. A cow came over, nuzzled his hand, and the grain was gone. The cow appeared unharmed.

"You say this stuff has a high protein content?"

"So they tell me," Koloth replied.

"And it grows well in dry country?" Koloth repeated what he'd been told. JR muttered, "Daddy will be pleased with this stuff all right. A high protein, high yield grain means fatter cattle. That'll mean better beef and lower cost." He addressed Koloth. "How much of this stuff do you have?"

Now it was the captain's turn to think rapidly. They had started with forty kilograms of the unpoisoned grain. They would have to bring some back to the Empire, some had already been utilized... "We have twenty kilograms," Koloth said smoothly. "Naturally, we cannot give you our entire supply. Once you have the grain you can grow it at will, experiment with it -- whatever pleases you."

"Well, now, that sounds all right to me," JR said. "Looks like your boy has his stones. You send me down ten kilos, and I'll send up a can filled with our rocks. I wouldn't want you boys sparkling off on me after I help you out of the mess you're in." The Texan grinned at the Klingons.

Koloth smiled back as his thoughts raced wildly. This simpleminded Earther was willing to give him all the dilithium crystals he and the Empire could use for a hundred cycles! Koloth had no intention of merely handing them over to the High Command -- they would be his passport into the inner circles of the Empire!

"May I beam up, sir?" Kerash asked, his hands filled with stones. "I can send a canister down when I get back to the ship." $\frac{1}{2}$

"Yes, go ahead." As Kerash disappeared, visions of the Purple danced in Koloth's head. JR and the captain regarded each other almost fondly while a yellow container emerged from the transporter sparkle. JR fished around in the jeep.

"I've got a paint can here," he said grandly.
"You can fill 'er up!"

Korax grabbed the rest of the stones previously selected by Kerash. Koloth helped his lieutenant fill the can. The stones would reek of fossil

fuels and alien chemicals, but he would get them back to the Empire! Koloth and Korax would be rich --

armonoro

Kerash lost no time inserting the Earther dilithium into his converter. Following the slightly fuzzy instructions he had secretly taped when Engineer Scott was in his cups, Kerash warmed up the engines, and gave the navigator precise instructions. The star ship picked up speed, swung past Sol in a wide parabola bringing it past Earth and out into the solar system and back through space and time to the Empire. It was, as Kirk and his crew had once discovered, a bumpy ride, but at least the ship emerged into its own time and headed for the Klingon sphere of influence. Kerash headed for the Officer's Refectory to report to his commander.

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"Krib told me to tell you he's had a message from the High Command. They want to know where we have been. That miserable worm, Arne Darvin, is supposed to be picked up--" At a look from the captain, he changed the subject. "It's a good thing I got the dilithium crystals out of that water when I did. Another few hours in that stream and they'd have started to break down."

"What do you mean?" asked Koloth, looking at the paint can.

"The water has trace elements of hydrocarbons, from the fossil fuels burned by those internal combustion vehicles," Kerash explained. "Exposure to hydrocarbons is fatal to the emanations necessary for matter/antimatter fusion. No wonder the Earthers are constantly looking for dilithium - they must have destroyed their own supply long before they ever needed it!" Kerash smirked. Then he stopped. He had never seen Korax look so glum, or Koloth look so furious.

The Klingon captain glared at the paint can and its cargo of useless stones. "And we gave that Earther our quadrotriticale--" he fumed.

"Not precisely, sir," Kerash said. "I seem to have made another mistake. I had to put the -- the vermin from the station into something when I took them out of the engines, so I put them into the canisters we used to hold the poisoned grain. I think that one of those canisters got sent down to Earther Ewing."

Koloth began to smile. "It'll serve that Earther right! Just wait until he opens it! The thought of it almost makes up for your presence on my vessel!"

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JR smiled happily as he lifted the alien canister out of the back of the jeep. He wanted to test the new grain right away. It didn't kill cows; what kind of meat would it put on chickens? He brought the canister out to the small chicken pen adjourning the barn. His niece Lucy was

there, dismounting from her horse. As JR lifted the lid of the canister, he smiled in eager anticipation.

"JR!" Lucy exclaimed. "What on earth do you have there?" $\label{eq:continuous}$

"It's supposed to be wheat!" he said, staring at the seething mass of multicolored fluff boiling out of the canister. "What the hell -- those goddam crooks!" He glared wildly up into the cloudless blue Texas sky.



The fluff separated itself into individual balls of fur. Lucy bent down and cuddled one in her hands. "Where did you get them, JR? They're tribbles! Real live tribbles!"

"I don't care what they are, I don't want them!" JR kicked one of the tribbles. The tribble purred winningly up at him.

"Well, I know a bunch of kids at school who'd be tickled pink to have one," Lucy said. "How did you get them -- JR, did we have visitors?" Her eyes grew big and round. "JR, don't lie to me. Did we have funny looking visitors here this afternoon? One of them a tall man, sort of green around the gills, with pointed ears?"

JR admitted that there had been some odd-looking people around the place. "But it wasn't the ears, it was the eyebrows that were pointed -- Did you say pointed ears?" he said, as the full import of Lucy's statement hit him. "Like those Trekkie people?"

Lucy nodded, still stunned. JR's eyes narrowed in thought. Then he snapped out, "What time is it in New York?"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe four o'clock in the afternoon. Why?"

"You still got that thing, that circular or whatever it was, about that Trekkie convention? Didn't it have a telephone number on it?" JR hustled Lucy into the house, kicking tribbles out of his path as he ran. He shouted to the bewildered hands, "Round up those fuzzy little things and put 'em back into that can, and don't let them loose! Lucy, find me that flyer. I've got to call that number in New York."

A few minutes later, JR Ewing lounged back in his chair, a fresh drink in one hand, the phone in the other, and a look of unholy glee on his face. "Mr. T?" he said to the man in New York. "This is JR Ewing. I think you and I can do a little business."

RETREAT FROM

DANGER

A NIGHTSIDE Story

Abbie Herrick

As he took his hands from his face, Darth Vader realized he was a different man. The breeze washed cold-shower fresh against his skin, the windborne pollinating filcathias scented the air with purpled luminance. He danced naked through the grassy meadow, his feet luxuriating in the cool slickness of the stems beneath his feet. He ran, leaving his weedy little wife, Lyda, far behind; his lungs sucked great gasps of the sweet unfiltered air. No mask, no armor. Free -- until he saw the bridge shrunken even more than last time, and those on the other side beckoning, calling, trying to draw him across.

"Lyda!" he called and felt only a slight resistance.

Then the machine went off its sleep cycle and pushed a painful gust of air into his chest. Vader was again himself. Sitting up, his eyes behind the lenses of his soft sleeping-mask focused first on the stone walls of his villa bedchamber, then on the ancient furnishing gleaned from forgotten races, and finally on Lyda still sleeping beside him. And he wondered what kind of woman would marry a crippled Sith Lord and stay with him for so long. Vader turned back to the machine at the head of the bed. The indicators showed that what passed for his lungs had been cleaned of mucus and medicated, and that his body, except for roughage, had been properly nourished. He could detach the hose than ran to his throat-collar and go back on his respirator. If he wanted to. Instead, he lay back and felt his wife's small body lean toward his. It had been too long since he last savored the luxury of sleeping in a bed instead of trying to rest, fully clothed, in a

meditation chamber. Gently, he slipped an arm around Lyda and drew her against him. The dream had frightened him more now than ever: he had seen the individuals on the other side of the bridge. And one of them was Kenobi, calling him to cross to his death. Vader shivered, even though his skin was hot from not wearing his temperature-regulating clothing. He remembered the old man's smile just before he had cut Kenobi down two years before on board the Death Star. Serene at the point of death, the Jedi master had conserved his energy, focusing it into a psychic force powerful enough to plague Vader for the rest of his days.

The warmth of his wife's body comforted him. So small, she could be Leia, he thought. But he shook his head, shutting the fantasy out of his mind. It was that kind of thinking that caused him to ignore the report that the young Senator for Alderaan was a possible spy -- until she had escaped with the Death Star plans.

That little shape under the covers could be Leia, he caught himself thinking again. Vader remembered the first time he had heard Senator Organa speak in the Imperial Chambers. In her defiance of the old men around her she was as strong and as brave in her own way as Lyda. And Leia was a woman who could grace any man's arm. But when Lyda had been the Alderaani's age, she still thought like a streetfighter; and even with her Sith training, she could still barely function in Imperial society.

Vader's Sith master, Enir Vorg had recommended their marriage, though, and on his word, so had the Emperor.



Lyda was his watchdog, too limited in her emotional receptiveness to be affected by Kenobi's sendings. Bur what capacity she did have was strong enough to keep Kenobi at bay, to keep Vader from crossing the bridge, to allow him to wake up in the morning. But the very fact that he needed another's Force to guard his sleep crippled him as a warrior. He had been too conceited to realize it at the time, but that must have been what the old master meant by more power than Vader himself could imagine.

Nestling against him, Lyda rubbed her sleepswollen eyes. The fatigue of Force-guarding him showed in her haggard face.

"Lyda, I will be entering Retreat."

She watched him unquestioningly. "How long, do you think?"

"I don't know." As long as it took him to clear his mind and rebuild his defenses.

"Do you want me to come?" She did not implore him, but merely inquired as if she were asking if he needed an extra powerpack.

"There is a Star Destroyer waiting to take me on a mission to Messalon." He paused, watching Lyda as she looked up at him. There had been reports of heavy rebel activity in the Messalon system. Vader wanted to go himself, but now... "It might be better if you went in my stead, Lyda."

Lyda nodded and left their bed to prepare for her journey.

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He ran naked through the fragrant grasses. He

heard them calling. But it wasn't him they wanted, he tried to tell them: not him; the other, the one from whom he'd been cloned.

Dreyar Kredd leaned over the grimy bar and ordered another drink, trying to wash the nightmare away. It was the worst dream he'd had since twenty years ago when a series of agonizing nightmares brought about his breakdown at the Academy. Dreyar watched the blue Kesselian spice swirl in his cheap Lystrian wine. The physicians had diagnosed his collapse as stemming from too much stress and had told him to forget about any ambitions for a military career, not that an orphan with father unknown in his birth record had much of a chance in the Officer Corps anyway. He considered himself lucky that he had made engine repairman.

Over the years the dreams had changed, and Dreyar had wondered if maybe the doctors had been right. As he shifted his goals, he dreamed he was a man of increasing power. He dreamed he flew with the Imperial fleet, crushing all the Emperor's enemies; that when he walked, crowds parted for him, and even the highest Imperial officer would incline his head to him. And when the time spent dreaming became fonder to Dreyar than his waking hours, he took to drink.

But recently he questioned if it might not be his other self who somehow caused the dreams. A voice had come to him in the night, an old voice it seemed, saying that he was a copy of someone else. He hadn't known it until then, and when making inquiries, sometimes backed with Imperial currency, all attempts to uncover his origins had been foiled by authorities with the whispered warning that it was better left unknown. And lately he had noticed people shadowing him. Glancing at the figures huddled in the darkness, Dreyar Kredd thought it was time to leave.

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Footsteps padded softly after Dreyar in the filthy street behind the tavern. Ducking into the darkened recess of a bricked-up alley, Dreyar waited as someone approached hesitantly. Something metallic scraped against the rough wall centimeters from the corner. He shook his head. He had been chased by some pretty clumsy characters in his day, but this one was the stupidest. Snapping out his hand, he felt the cloth bunch in his muscular grasp. He pulled the assailant off his feet and threw him against the wall.



The raw fear of one expecting imminent death iced over the young man's face as he struggled to his feet.

"Who sent you?" Dreyar demanded. "Tell me before I take you apart."

The young man just stared at him with a mixed expression of both awe and revulsion. After swallowing, he found his voice. "W-we need your help," he stammered.

Dreyar spat, then he threw back his head and laughed. His eye caught the young man as he tried to retrieve the weapon that had fallen from his belt. With lightning speed Dreyar caught his assailant's wrist in a crushing grip.

"Fool!" Grabbing him by the wrist, Dreyar kicked the cylindrical object away.

"No!" the young man wailed.

"You won't miss it long." Turning the stranger's arm painfully, Dreyar gripped his throat.

"Let go or you're dead." Dreyar felt the cold prick of a blaster muzzle in his back. An older, more competent voice. The young one had been just a diversion. Good, but not good enough.

Releasing the young man, Dreyar pivoted and brought the same hand down to break the other man's hold on his blaster while snapping a punch to his temple. He had barely fallen to his knees when Dreyar felt a dart strike his shoulder. He twisted and pulled it free. A drug-filled Wookiee dart it was, and in his rapidly dimming vision Dreyar saw the huge, furred creature that had shot him.

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In one of the lesser populated regions of the Galaxy lies a cluster of systems that even the most roguish space pirate would choose to avoid. For this is the region that was settled by those who aeons ago broke away from the nomadic Jedi. They could not tolerate the Jedi's loose egalitarianism and had created a more structured hierarchy. Over the centuries they had grown into extended family lines and increased their fortifications against the distrusted outside. Inbred, the old Jedi teachings became like air in an unopened room — at first, stale; and then, corrupted. And the corruption continued until each generation raised its children in the Way of Darkness — the Way of the Sith.

On the perimeter of the Sith Quadrant orbits Grang, the world on which Lord Enir Vorg had built his Sith retreat upon retiring from active Tife to become a Sith master. On this world, under Vorg, Darth Vader had trained: first as a child, before he broke with his family to join Obi-wan Kenobi; later as an adult, crippled and shamed by Kenobi's wrath.

As soon as Vader stepped from the Imperial shuttle to Grang's surface he felt rejuvenated, the concentrated power of the Dark Force negating all telepathic intrusion. A black-garbed young woman led him to the landcruiser that Master Vorg had sent. It stopped at a residence block, and the woman led him to his cubicle; a carrier-droid tracked behind with his luggage.

"My name is Deema." Her green eyes shone with admiration, bright against her olive skin. "I am assigned to aid you."

Vader nodded curtly, and she took him inside to show him around.

"We are prepared for your special needs, my Lord." Deema indicated the temperature control equipment and the specialized cleansing and medicating respiration machine at the head of his bed.

"Very good," he said with a gesture of dismissal. As soon as the door slid shut behind her, Vader activated the droid machinery that would help him out of his armor.

After bathing, Vader donned a hooded Sith robe. He wore his soft sleeping mask and his chest respirator -- nothing else. Armor was forbidden here, and the atmosphere was cool enough to make protective clothing unnecessary. He closed the front and let the loose sleeves hang past his scarred hands. Other hooded figures nodded greeting to him as he made his way to Master Vorg's tower. Vader felt at ease here, among equals instead of cowering underlings and enemies.

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As he drifted back into consciousness, Dreyar heard voices batting around him.

"See, Ben was right. The tracer-droid agrees."

"Ben almost lost you your ass, too," said the voice that belonged to the owner of the blaster.

"So this is what he'd look like...." a feminine contralto trailed off thoughtfully.

"Do you like what you see?" Dreyar asked sarcastically as he opened his eyes. When he tried to move, he found himself bound.

The small woman standing over him turned away, revealing a strong, aristocratic profile. She spoke to the taller man, whose face bore a conspiratorial grin. "I hope that along with the regular briefing, you will inform Mr. Kredd of proper manners -- that is, if you can dry the alcohol from his blood." She left the room, her gown a blurred whiteness in the corner of his eye.

The spidery gene-tracer droid hummed softly.

"You should know by now I'm only a clone of whoever's genetic information you have in there."

"We knew that when we followed you," said the taller man. Dreyar recognized a Corellian accent. But the impact of those words made him shudder. Someone had wanted a clone. Probably to provide new organs for the original. He suddenly realized the corollary of that thought.

The Corellian seemed to notice his nervousness. "Don't worry. We're not going to hurt you." He had the air of a long-time spacer. His companion glared at Dreyar balefully.

"I'm Han Solo," the Corellian said. "This," he pointed to the younger man who had been the original attacker, "is Luke Skywalker. You're in an Alliance base."

Alliance, Dreyar thought, his insides turning to ice. These are the terrorists of the news holos, the fanatics that'll do anything to destroy the Empire. "And what would your -- Alliance want with a drunken enginehack like me? I'm nobody important."

"But the one you're cloned from is," said Solo. "You've heard of Darth Vader?"

A twitch of hatred flickered over Skywalker's face.

"You mean Lord Darth Vader?" Dreyar strained

at his bonds. Memories of the dreams flashed through his mind. "I'm the clone of a Sith Lord?"

From the blast of cold air, Dreyar knew that an outer door had been open and shut. He heard the dragging whisper of scmeone moving stiffly in heavy clothing.

Solo looked past him. "How's it going, General?"

"This weather will kill me yet," said a raspy old man's voice. Painfully, the old man moved closer, and Dreyar could see the frost still clinging to his beard where his breath had condensed and frozen. As Skywalker helped him off with his quilted jacket, Solo introduced him as General Dodonna. "We've been able to trace your origins," the elderly man told him gently. "Not long after Vader's birth, he fell dangerously ill." Dreyar could see that the general didn't look too well himself. "Being of noble birth, his genetic information was stored for cloning purposes, and when death seemed inevitable, the clone was implanted in a surrogate mother."

"But Vader didn't die," Skywalker said bitterly.

"No," said Dodonna. Dreyar wondered for a moment if his were not the voice from the dream, but then realized that this man's manner of speaking was too different. "But for some reason the clone wasn't aborted. Its mother disappeared and was never heard from again."

"I don't like being called an 'it'," said Dreyar. "And I <u>don't</u> like helping a bunch of rebel terrorists assassinate a hero!"

"We're <u>not</u> terrorists," said Skywalker, anger tightening his voice. "We're freedom fighters -and Vader's the worst murderer in history!"

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"I've not seen you in a long time." The old man gestured for Vader to sit on a cushion. "You seem deeply troubled."

The simplicity of Vorg's chamber belied the power he wielded. Cushions were the only furnishings. Light came from the wall of shuttered windows that left bands of red sunset slanting against the opposite wall.

"Dreams, Master. Obi-wan Kenobi sends dreams that draw me from my body."

"It was a mistake to kill one in a state of spiritual grace," Vorg said calmly. "Now he is all strength to prey on your weaknesses."

He was unable to restrict the thought from his consciousness: weaknesses such as being duped by a soft glance from a young woman begging Imperial clearance to rush medical supplies to a plaguestricken planet.

"The dreams rob me of sleep," said Vader.
"They cripple me as a warrior."

"You were crippled long before."

"No," said Vader, his anger rising. "This," he touched his respirator, "has not impeded my usefulness to the Empire. I am stronger now than I have ever been." He stood his full two-meter height before his master. The old man's dark face displayed no concern over Vader's arrogant breach of etiquette.

"You speak as if you were some kind of superior droid," said Vorg.

"I function as well as any other man," Vader said as the conceit rose in him. "I have a wife, two offspring -- with the incompetents running the military the Empire would collapse if it weren't for me."

"Are you sure of that, Darth?"

"Of course." Vader's thumbs sought to hook themselves in a belt that wasn't there.



Vader confronts Master Vorg-

"Including the other Sith?"

Shocked, Vader realized his impropriety and sat down again. Forgive me, Master." He lowered his head.

"How is your family?" asked Vorg.

Vader pondered the seemingly unrelated question. "Aura and young Darth are in school. Lyda will replace me at Messalon."

"You speak of your wife last," said Vorg.

"There is trouble?"

"No," Vader said uneasily. He felt Vorg's mind like tentacles probing his: the shame Vader had felt right after his disastrous encounter with Obi-wan Kenobi when Vorg first looked upon his ruined body; the shame of having to introduce his uncouth bride at a hostile Imperial reception; and worst of all, the shame he had felt while using the mind-probe on Leia: she had known of his attraction to her and held it in the deepest contempt.

"You don't love your wife," said Vorg heavily. "Not with the passion you hold for the rebel princess. This is the weakness Kenobi found, Darth." The old man paused. "And if you expect to keep your sanity, it must be purged."

Vader sank to his knees from the agony of the emotions erupting within him. The Master's hold on him was worse than any mechanical probe. good to her. I give her all I can."

"Do you, Darth?" asked the Master.

"We have two children to prove it."

"They only prove your manhood, Darth," Vorg persisted.

The Force-probe continued. Vader saw the princess run after Moff Tarkin with her gasped denial as the governor ordered the destruction of Alderaan. He clutched her shoulder, not so much to restrain her but to feel the soft flesh under her gown -and to comfort her as he witnessed the destruction of her people. He had played for time with Tarkin, allowing Leia to escape on the freighter that he knew was bound for the rebel base. He had hoped that she would leave there before he destroyed it, even though he knew she would stay with her people until the end. Even while he shot down rebel pilots in the Death Star's trench, every other thought was on Leia. And those thoughts had slowed his reflexes enough to keep him from avoiding the grazing from his wingman's crippled Tie-fighter. Even as he spun into space with the nova of the exploding Death Star behind him, he did not care that his attempt to save the battlestation was a failure. His only thought was: Leia is safe.

I am as much of a traitor as she is. Sobbing, he buried his ruined face in the cushions, letting them absorb his shame.

He felt the gnarled hand rest on the back of his scarred head. "Rest," the Master said. "And heal." And silently the old man left.

Dreyar shook himself awake, taking some moments to remember where he was. He had had another dream, worse than the last. But at least now he knew that they were meant not for him, but the other. Dodonna had told him that Vader's crimes were preying upon his subconscious and being reflected on Dreyar. He didn't believe everything the general had said, but rest and decent food had done much to change his opinion of the Alliance. That and an occasional bottle slipped to him by Han Solo.

"That's a lot more than Vader would ever give you if he discovered your existence," Solo had said.

"But I'd be a brother to him."

"You'd be a new pair of lungs."

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Dreyar realized that he was virtually being kept prisoner. He was only allowed free access in a limited area of the underground complex, and the few people who came to talk to him refused to tell him where he was.

"It's so the Empire can't torture you and make you reveal our location," Leia had explained to him prior to a briefing. Dreyar noticed that her white jumpsuit was cold-weather insulated and that flakes of unmelted snow still clung to her boots.

"Still snowing?" asked Dreyar. "When does spring come anyhow?" $\,$

Leia ignored his questions and sat with her lips tightened in front of the monitor. "Just look how he walks," she said, pointing to the news-holos of the black-robed Vader. "You can see the arrogance in every step he takes. It's as if he's above all caring of any kind." The flickering light took all the humanity from her expression. "He acts as if he's some kind of superior species — as if human beings are not better than machinery to be used and discarded...."

Dreyar touched her shoulder. "You have something personal against him?"

She squeezed her eyes shut as the strength that had hardened her expression crumbled. "It's just that..."

The door slid open to admit a middle-aged man and a medical droid. Dreyar was given a dose of an awareness stimulant.

Colonel Rieekan, the old general's second-in-command, explained the plan to Dreyar as the general himself was now bedridden. "The Sith use tracer droids to identify their members by scanning their genetic structure. That scan can be fooled only by an identical twin -- or a clone. We'll sneak you in," said Rieekan. "We have that ability."

"But how will I be able to replace Vader? Don't they know him intimately there?"

The colonel shook his head. "The only one who knows him is old Master Vorg. You won't be down there long enough for him to get a whiff of you."

"What if Vader himself finds me?"

Rieekan looked him in the eye. "You'll kill him."

Dreyar gasped. Ignoring him, Rieekan switched the monitor to display a map representing the retreat complex. With the drug enhancement, the tangled lines became a three-dimensional reality inside Dreyar's mind.

"On Grang, Vader is not permitted armor,"
Rieekan continued. "Just a robe and whatever lifesupport he needs." The colonel handed Dreyar a
primitive-looking weapon. "Energy weapons are not
allowed either. But this will pass their scanners
unnoticed."

Dreyar studied the weapon. It looked like a toy in his hands. "A projectile-firer?"

Rieekan nodded. "Made from the same alloy as Vader's respirator." He held up his finger for emphasis. "One warning. You only have five shots with that weapon. The ammunition is of a different metal, a kind that can be easily traced if we risked giving you more. And unlike a blaster, it bucks when it's fired -- which could throw off your aim."

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"You might say Leia has something personal against Vader," Solo answered Dreyar's question on his last day at the base. "He and Moff Tarkin blew up her home planet."

"And what about the kid?" asked Dreyar, referring to Skywalker.

"He says Vader killed his old man."

"Nice guy -- eh?" Dreyar said sarcastically.

Solo nodded and offered Dreyar a parting drink. "Just enough to keep you going before you start the mission. They're going to give you a new drug. Your senses and reflexes will be temporarily heightened and Force-sensitive."

"And drinking while on that stuff would finish me." said Dreyar as he took the glass.

"That's about it," said Solo. He handed Dreyar a heavy jacket and pushed the button that opened the outer door of the briefing room. A blast of cold air struck Dreyar's face as he saw the icelined tunnels beyond.

"And like they've been telling me," continued Solo, "Force-sensitive isn't Force-trained. You'll still have to watch your ass."

Colonel Rieekan met them in the command ship's hangar. "We're lucky you've got a repairman license," he said. "A damaged Star Destroyer has just left the Messalon system. It's requesting permission to enter the Sith Quadrant and wants a repair ship to meet it -- right over the Grang retreat complex."

"And you're going to sneak me aboard," said Dreyar. "An odd bit of luck, that."

Solo shrugged. "Well, the Force is with us."

"Not really." Luke Skywalker stood by the ramp to the ship. "That Star Destroyer totally wiped out our Messalon base -- and a good part of the population."

Dreyar turned on him with a fierceness that made Skywalker flinch. "Look, I'm damn tired of

you treating me like some kind of monster! Being Darth Vader's clone doesn't make me Darth Vader."

Skywalker lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Friends, then?" Dreyar offered his hand. "I'm going to need you to get out of this."

After a moment of hesitation, Skywalker shook his hand. "Friends."

Deema seemed strangely silent when she fixed Vader's room or brought him food. The Sith Lord realized that in his involvement in his own problems he had forgotten to repay her services. With his natural aloofness to other beings, he had barely even spoken to her.

"How are you with a saber?" he asked.

Deema kept her eyes on her delicate hands as she set out his things. "I'm not much good at it," she said.

He watched her place the nutrients and medication into the machine that would supply them to him while he slept. Some bland edibles to supply his needed bulk; oil to moisturize his dry, burn-scarred skin. He thought of Lyda as the girl handled his personal items, the sun glinting golden off her ginger curls.

The sessions with Vorg had been torture worse than any he had ever applied to the rebels. But it was necessary; he had to rebuild his defenses



against further psychic attack. He lay back on his bed. He wanted to go to the training area, but at the moment he was just too exhausted.

"When do you usually saber-train?" he asked.

"Eighteen hundred," she said.

"Good," he replied. "I will be well-rested by then and able to help you."

She bowed, thanking him, and he caught her stifled impulse to run to him and kiss his hand. Having perceived her strong emotions, he wondered why it had taken him so long to notice.

After she left, he removed his chest respirator and hooked himself into the large machine. He'd heard that he was a hero among some of the younger Sith, but he would have never thought of himself as a romantic idol.

"You must realize that whatever rift there is," Vorg had said during the last session, "Kenobi will widen it into a crevass."

"Lyda is a good warrior," Vader remembered saying, exhausted beyond all caring. "We complement each other."

"That is all?" Vorg asked, his dark eyes nailing Vader to the wall. "Or do you feel she is the best a man like you can get?"

Vader recalled the fierce child he had rescued from two full-grown attackers so many years ago. He had never expected Vorg to accept her for training so easily when he had brought her to Grang. And he had never dreamed that four years later when, in the depths of loneliness and depression, he had met Vorg for consultation, that the old master would recommend his marriage to Lyda.

"Instead of a child you pulled from a filthy alley when you were still young and altruistic."

"If it were not for this," Vader held his hands to his mask, "I could have my choice of any woman from the best of families."

"But your wife was accepted by the Sith," Vorg said firmly. "That makes her the equal of any nobility."

Now as he lay in bed remembering, Vader removed his mask so that the tears would not choke him. Again he recalled the past. After being left to decay by the Republic, the only thing pretty about the planet of Navoril was its name. It had been Vader's mission to resettle it for the Empire. Even though he had first donned his Sith garb and his life-support equipment only a few years before, he had already gained a reputation for cruelty, no doubt due more to his appearance than to his actions. And all through the ensuing years no one spoke to him when they did not have to.

He remembered the day when, disgusted by the stupidity of his subordinates, he had taken a walk through the city to clear his head. His curiosity had been aroused by the sounds of a nearby street fight. And he had seen a young girl -- who, he realized, was more alone in the universe than he -- struggling to defend herself against two men who were trying to rape her.

Vader did not realize he had slept until the buzzer woke him. Absently, he touched the button by his bed that would raise the door. He was still half-asleep when he felt a warm presence and heard Deema's hesitant words.

"Lord Vader? It's eighteen hundred."

Opening his eyes, he realized he still had his mask off. He turned and saw Deema respectfully facing the wall. "I'm sorry. If you can't...."

"He slipped on his mask. "Of course I can." He pulled his robe down to his waist to change respirators and noticed the admiring glance Deema gave him from the corner of her eye. He would have to take care not to use her to fill the void left by Vorg's purge of Leia from his emotions.

The walk through the cool air to the training center cleared his head. He heard Deema stumble awkwardly behind him, trying to match his stride, and felt a slight tug as her foot touched the hem of his robe.

"You would fare much better, Deema, if you looked ahead instead of at me," he said.

It took half the practice session just to correct Deema's stances. She used a wood-bladed saber with its handle balanced to make it feel like a real one, but her every move needed correction as if her arms and legs were not quite connected to her brain and could only follow orders badly. He would straighten her hips and back, but with every move she went out of alignment.

Vader remembered Master Vorg's warning that Kenobi would create the most damage with the least expenditure of energy. Before their marriage, Vorg had warned him that Lyda's lack of emotion crippled her in a way no Sith training could correct; that he would have to breathe love into her the way his respirator breathed life into him. He had almost forgotten.

"Is this what you want, Lord Vader?" With her eyes, Deema sought his approval in a way Lyda never could have done.

"Is it what you want?" he asked sternly. As his patience waned so did her attraction for him. "Your energy should be focused in one direction, not scattered all about."

At the end of the session, Deema was exhausted. But her concentration had increased with her fatigue, and she improved.

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Over the retreat complex, the crippled Star Destroyer hung in synchronous orbit. Taking leave of Deema, Vader stood in silent meditation. Yes,

Lyda was aboard.

Are you healed, my husband? came her thoughts.

I am healing.

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On board the repair ship, his hands trembling, Dreyar rechecked the equipment he would take in place of that needed to actually repair the Star Destroyer. He would be in the vastness of space with no safety save a lifeline hooked to his repair droid. But the droid was in actuality a collapsible escape pod which would "accidentally" detach itself from the Star Destroyer and guide him safely to the planet below.

"Rendezvous in ten minutes," announced a voice on the loudspeaker. $\ensuremath{\text{\fontfamily loss}}$

Dreyar clipped his seal-belt on and licked his lips, wishing for some wine to wet them.

>>>>>>>>>

As he walked to his morning session with Vorg, Vader knew it would be another day before the huge ship was repaired. Lyda would come down then. And Vader suddenly found himself walking with a more buoyant stride than usual. He was anxious to see her again.

>>>>>>>>

On the Star Destroyer, Dreyar stood in a corridor, waiting for the change of shift.

"You look nervous." He jumped at the sound of the rough female voice.

He stopped rubbing his hands together and hooked his thumbs in his belt. It took a moment for him to recognize the woman.

"Lady." He bowed to Lyda. Trembling, he gripped his belt even harder. She laughed.

"My lady," he asked nervously, "have I done something wrong?" $\,$

"You remind me of my husband when you do that."

"Oh." He forced his hands to his sides.

"You are nervous." She smiled.

"I think everyone is." He shrugged. "The sooner we're out of here, the better." $\label{eq:theory}$

"That's our shield." She smiled again. "The whole Sith Quadrant is Force-shielded to keep out intruders."

"But, my lady," said Dreyar, "we're here."

"It was opened to allow us here." He detected a facetious tone in the Sith woman's voice. "Otherwise you non-Sith would have all gone mad and killed each other." She turned her face to the side and looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Of course, they could close it up the moment I

disembarked just to see how well it is working."

Dreyar forced a meager chuckle. He was in no mood for Sith humor; she might still see into his mind at any moment and know his purpose. But she turned her eyes and her attention to the viewport.

"The repairs should be finished soon," he said, regaining control. "They might not even need my shift." Drug-sharpened, his brain began to calculate another way onto the planet, perhaps as the Lady's escort. You care for him, he thought, watching her expression. Dreyar had never imagined a Sith lord being loved. Admired, respected, feared even, but....

"Yes, I do," she said gently. "Very much."
She smiled. "I didn't mean to pry," she turned her
back to him, "but there's something about you -You look like the old pictures I've seen of him."

The loudspeaker called for the sixth shift.

"Isn't that yours?" she asked.

"Uh," he straightened his worksuit, "yes, my lady." He looked for his droid and found it squatting beside him. He strode away but, glancing back he saw the Sith woman staring after him.

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Vader sat before his master, waiting for him to acknowledge his presence.

"Darth," the old man said, "how long have you seen military service as a Sith Lord?"

"Over twenty years," said Vader.

"That is quite a time."

Vader saw the incalculable age in Vorg's face and realized what he wanted: someone to train as his replacement in the retreat, hidden away while all the glory of war and conquest went to others.

"I cannot, Master. I crave an active life."

"You have confused your loyalties," said Vorg. "The Sith do not work $\underline{\text{for}}$ the Empire, we work $\underline{\text{with}}$ it -- for now."

Vader lowered his head. "Yes, Master."

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Dreyar adjusted the vocal equipment in the mask to duplicate Vader's voice. He strapped the holster on his arm. With nothing underneath the robes, the bulge of his weapon would show anywhere but on the inside of his sleeve.

"We'd like you to stay and work here," said the Master. "You've proven yourself in war. Now you can cast away your armor and grow to more spiritual goals." He waited for Vader's answer.

"I am content where I am," Vader said, not looking at him.

"But is it helping you? Is it helping the Sith?"

"I am respected and feared throughout the galaxy."

"Pride, Darth," Vorg cautioned. "Like the pride you feel in Deema's admiration of you."

Vader stared at his feet.

"You were all she ever spoke about," said Vorg, "so I let her attend you. I hope that that kind of empty fawning is not what gives you satisfaction in your position."

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Dreyar moved cautiously through the complex. The initial acceptance of the tracers on Grang lulled the other lords' suspicions, and the underlings would never dare question him. They saw only the mask and the stride and did not ponder the identity of the man underneath. To the other lords who did look at him strangely, the mention of a need for medication satisfied them. But it was obvious that Vader did not have much contact with the others. Finally, Dreyar located his destination. The door sensor read his genetic code and admitted him.

"Lord Vader, you're back early."

Frozen with shock, Dreyar saw the young woman with the housekeeping droid. By her attitude and attire he knew she was neither a pleasure woman nor a servant, but a student assigned to be Vader's aide.

"I'll be finished soon," she said in cheerful abstraction. "Eighteen hundred?" $\label{eq:condition}$

What's at eighteen hundred? He nodded, playing along to see what she would say next. Her superficial thoughts were so confused that even with the enhancement of the drug he could not read them. But he knew they were about Vader. Or at least the girl's heroic projection of Vader. Dizzy female.

"Do you want me to call for you?"

"No," he said using the mask's equipment. "I'll meet you there."

"Yes." Disappointment clouded her face. But then he felt an uncluttered thought touch him. She wasn't as dizzy as he thought, just infatuated. "Lord Vader, is there something wrong?" Her eyes began to narrow.

Quickly, Dreyar sought to recover himself. "I have something special for you there." He paused as she watched him questioningly. "You may leave now."

The command in his voice caused her to drop her eyes. Thanking him, she walked to the door. But at the threshold she stopped and turned back to him. "Master Vorg left something special for you -- and Lady Vader when she joins you here." His heart skipped a beat. "It's on the desk."

Deema left. If things worked out neither she

nor the Sith woman would ever see Vader again. Dreyar turned his attention to the desk. Master Vorg had left a bottle of wine. He gazed at it longingly. Dagorian, the best in the galaxy, not the poison he was used to. Dreyar had always wanted to taste Dagorian wine. He licked his lips. Solo's warning came fleetingly to mind. But he couldn't have meant Dagorian. Dreyar reached for the bottle.

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"I was meant to be a warrior," Vader protested. "Sendentary life would destroy me." $\,$

"Your life would not be sendentary," said Vorg.

"What of Lyda?"

"She would stay with you, of course."

"She will not like it."

"Why not?" asked Vorg. "Bad feelings?"

"She needs challenges as much as I do," said Vader. "We need to be on our own, in order to appreciate our times together."

"Do you appreciate them?" Vorg smiled.

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Removing his mask, Dreyar put the ruby liquid to his lips. Again, the Corellian's warning echoed in his brain. But he ignored it and downed a glass. Fortified, he pressed against the door. Suddenly, his mind exploded with a profusion of light and sound. Molecules spiraled in the light around him. He saw images of conquest and power and disdain for anything non-Sith. He felt a new kind of energy building up inside. Walls and ceilings became transparent. His mind grew to omniscience. He detected Deema on her way to some class near the landing pad, wondering what she had done to displease him. He heard two of the Sith Lords he had met earlier asking if Master Vorg knew how badly off Vader was.

Vader! Dreyard felt a tortured presence. He left the cubicle, his eyes locked on a solitary tower. Vader was there. With someone even more powerful than he. Dreyar touched the gun in his sleeve. What kind of bounty would he get for a Sith Master as well as a Sith Lord?

Stupid fools, he thought as he strode past the younger Sith who dared not even challenge his lack of greeting. So assured of their paltry security devices were they that they would not even consider that an imposter would walk among them. His brain surged with power. He would have been twice the Sith Lord Vader was had he been given the same chances. It's all Vader's fault, Dreyar thought as he neared the tower. And now he's going to pay!

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"Why isn't the shuttle ready?" Lyda Vader demanded.

The Star Destroyer's captain clicked his heels

and bowed. "It isn't safe, my lady. An unknown craft has been spotted by our long range scanners."

"Why hasn't something been done about it?" she snapped.

"I sent a TIE out," he said, "but it hasn't returned or reported back." $\,$

"The way some of those pilots fly, I'd be surprised if it ever did."

Lyda paused, watching the man's increasing discomfort. "I want the shuttle readied immediately."

"Yes, my lady," the commander said with a nervous bow.

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Dreyar watched the shuttle drifting toward the pad. He stood in the outer chamber of the tower like a lone supplicant, meditating on the view through the great open arches. And in the quiet he could hear one voice, the voice of the man who terrorized the galaxy -- begging piteously. "I would not need people to fear me if I were like other men...if women looked upon me...as whole."

Dreyar slipped the gun from his sleeve. His brain burning in Dagorian flames, he sent the old-fashioned door crashing open.

A pair of black-shrouded forms leaned, half-crouched together. As he raised the weapon, Dreyar ripped off his mask. Let the monster see who kills him. With the shot, the taller figure slumped. But when the second form rose to full height, Dreyar realized his mistake. For a petrified moment they stared at each other. The eyes behind those darkened lenses must have recognized Dreyar for what he was. Vader's thoughts touched his mind. A new body. A new life. Dreyar aimed again. Too late. Vader's Force-blow deflected the pellet.

"Darth." Vorg's whisper rattled. Vader bent to give Force-healing to the wounded man as Ω Dreyar made his escape.

Replacing his mask, Dreyar found his way steal-thily to the shuttle pad. He tried to ascertain if Vader had sent out warnings, but his senses seemed clogged with cotton wool. Skywalker was supposed to pick him up. But Dreyar's thoughts were confused and he could not concentrate enough to use the Force to contact him. He hid as he saw robed figures running for the tower. Except for them, the complex seemed deserted.

Dreyar strode boldly down the walkway.

"Darth?"

He whirled and saw the Sith woman standing before him, Deema at her side. Hidden by his sleeve, his weapon lay clenched in his hand. He saw her eyes narrow in suspicion.



"Master, are you healing?" Vader asked, keeping his hand pressed to Vorg's chest. Envisioning the internal tissues, he carefully drew the pellet out and directed the Force to repair the damage left behind.

Suddenly, Vader cried out, a pain stabbing the side of his head. Lyda! He had felt a blast strike his wife. Not Lyda. His eyes squeezed shut.

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The Imperial shuttle squatted on the pad. Dreyar's long strides brought him to it quickly. He stepped inside and, as the mask's lenses adjusted to the light, he saw the diminuitive shuttle-pilot standing nervously inside the hatch.

"My lord, Lady Vader has already left."

Dreyar nodded. He could still hear Deema's screams echoing in the distance. At least Lady Vader had dropped without a sound.

"There seems to be some trouble outside," the pilot commented, standing uncomfortably at attention.

Dreyar didn't answer. His last shot sent the man out the hatch, landing him on the pavement in a

bloody heap.

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Reeling from the pellet's grazing, Lyda wiped the blood from the side of her face. Bad deflection. If that were a laser bolt, I'd have been dead. She crawled over to Deema who lay clutching her thigh, screaming. I'll never hear the end of this from Darth. She looked upward as the shuttle ascended into the sky. But her eyes searched for something else. She remembered the unknown ship the captain had mentioned earlier. But there was nothing she could do now but attend to Deema.

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Inside the Y-wing, Luke Skywalker tensed at the sound of Vader's voice rumbling over the radio in conversation with the Imperial Star Destroyer. But Skywalker knew the speaker was Dreyar, preparing to rendezvous.

Seeing the shuttle's approach, the young commander closed the seals of his pressure suit. The transfer would have to be made without benefit of an airlock. He watched the suited figure drift out of the craft as it began its return to the Star Destroyer on automatic pilot.

Opening his canopy, Skywalker affixed his lifeline. Dreyar drifted inertly toward him. Dragging the bigger man inside, Luke pumped oxygen through

his life support. After repressurizing the cabin, he pulled off Dreyar's helmet, but the man remained comatose. The odor of Dagorian sweetness on his breath was proof that the clone had disobeyed orders. Down in the spartan Sith retreat, the souse had found a bottle of wine.

Master Vorg rose unaided in the circle of Sith. He dismissed all but Vader and his wife.

"I'm afraid that was partially my fault."
Vorg moved his shoulder to take the stiffness out
of it. "If I hadn't requested that Lyda bring her
ship here for repairs, this never would have
happened."

"But that assassin was after me," said Vader grimly. "In fact, he's my clone."

"Dreyar," whispered Lyda. "He seemed to be such a harmless type."

"Kenobi's plan was more subtle than I thought," said $\mbox{\sc Vader.}$

Lyda touched the side of her head, trying to fluff her hair around the healing wound. "Why'd you let that clone escape? He could have killed Deema and me."

"You need to practice your techniques more," replied her husband.

"You couldn't kill him, Darth," said Vorg.

Vader shook his head. "It would be like killing myself, the self I could have been." The body I could have used, he thought. If I wanted to.

Vorg read his mind. "If you could stand being immobilized for the time it would take you to heal." The old master tapped his head. "I still remember when we first brought you in."

Inside the Alliance command ship, Dreyar Kredd lay stilfly in a cryogenic capsule.

"How long will he have to stay like that?" Luke asked as a medical technician pushed the button that would lower Dreyar into the storage hold.

"Who knows?" the man shrugged. "We'll have to keep him there until we can reverse the effects on his brain." He paused and his face took on a grim expression. "Or until somebody needs parts."

Luke shuddered at the thought of who that somebody might be. "Why can't Vader just clone himself another body?"

The technician laughed. "They don't grow like that. It takes a clone just as long to reach maturity as the original. And in order to grow

properly, they have to have the same nourishment and exercise."

"So they're kind of hard to keep," said Luke.

"You got it," said the man.

He turned and saw Leia and Han approaching the capsule. The slump of their bodies spoke of bad news.

"He didn't get Vader, did he?" said Luke.

"The lush shot up half the complex -- including a Sith Master and Vader's wife," said Han disgustedly. "What a lousy break."

Leia added quietly: "I have some more bad news." She paused, then said, "General Dodonna died in his sleep while you were gone."

"Oh," said Luke somberly. "I'm sorry to hear it."

"Yeah." The Corellian sighed. "And now that wheezing clown'll really be on our tails."

"Well...Dreyar paid for his weakness." Leia's eyes followed Kredd's muscular body as it disappeared below the deck. "I wonder if Vader looks... that good," she murmured.

"That's nasty," said Han, grimacing.

"Well, that's the way you men think of women," said Leia as she turned and left.



Luke's jaw dropped. "But Vader...?"

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"Stop it, Darth," Lyda Vader said playfully, squirming in her husband's embrace. "You've spent so much time out of your armor, you're acting silly."

"I can't help it," Vader whispered without his

mask in the darkness. "It's like losing a third of my weight."

"You've also lost Kenobi peeking in on you," Lyda giggled from the rough caress. "At least for a while "

"And it looks as if he is about to miss the best part."

THE DEADLY YEARS

Each minute draws us closer,
Each hour could be our last.
Each new pain, with
Each vague notion of incoherent thought,
Makes me realize I'm losing my faculties.
And draws me and them closer to death.

Who'd have thought we would die so young,
Old before our time.

Each time I glance into a mirror,

Each time I look at my wrinkled hands;

Each chill I feel,

Each pill I take, and test I make-
Could it be this time I'll be too late?

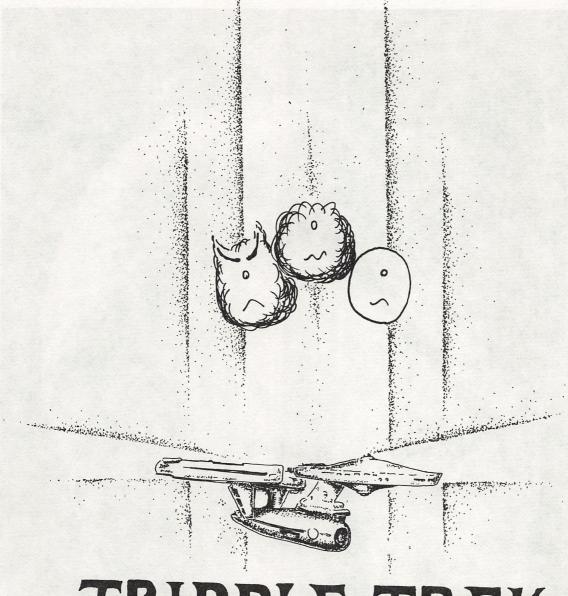
No miracles,
Miraculous discoveries,
No cure.

Is this what fate decreed?

The deadly years...

Tina W. Pole





TRIBBLE TREK

THE MOTION PICTURE

IN SPACE, NO-ONE CAN HEAR YOU GIGGLE





It came from an unexplored sector of $M\phi II y \psi \phi \phi \phi$ Space.

It ignored all attempts to stop it.

And it annihilated all opposition with multiple \$MpWiMpg Energy Bolts of unimaginable ferocity.

The USS Tribbleprise, refitted in dry-dock, was the only craft that Tribble Command could hitch a ride on to intercept the Cloud in time...

TRIBBLEMOUNT

PROUDLY PRESENTS

TRIBBLE TREK

The Motion Picture

Starring the original crew of the Tribbleprise:-

Captain...now an Admiral, James T. Tirk, affectionately known to his friends as Tum, due to his fondness for quadrotriticale;

Mr. Trok, the pointy-haired Trulcan who went back to Trulcan to join 'The Most Ancient Order of the Little Breeders';

Doctor Leonard McTroy, known to his friends as Boneless...

And all the rest...

Chief Engineer Thcott, the Thcotch engineer;

Tulu, Thekov, Tuhura, Thapel - and the reappearance of Janice Trand.

Also introducing Tilia, the beautiful bald Telltale navigator, and Commander Twill Trecker.

TRIBBLE TREK - THE MOTION PICTURE

A Gene Tribbleberry production
A Robert Unwise film
Screenplay by: Harold Livingtribble
Music by: Trebble Goldsmith
Story by: Alan Dean Troster

A short tribblization by Gene Tribbleberry Transcribed by the humanoid Tina W. Pole

A limited propagation

THEME FROM TRIBBLE TREK

Beyond The rim of the bread-bin My love Is wand'ring right in I know He'll find in crumb-clustered reaches Grain, Strange grain a tribble must eat it I know His journey ends never Tribbles breed on for ever But tell him While he populates the galaxy Remember, remember me & me & me & me & me & me, me, me, me...

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Chapter One

It. Something like a cloud. A cloud of indedescribable dimensions moved slowly yet quickly through the Galaxy, devouring everything that got in its path: Planet upon planet, starship upon starship, everything that just might contain food. For within its nucleus was this constant cry for food, and each time it was supplied with food there were more and new cries for food, and there -straight ahead of it -- was a whole cluster of habitable planets and ships and anything that might contain FOOD.

The hapless warships containing carbon-based life forms called Klingons (though the tribble spy that was lodged onboard the Klingon flagship, broadcasting messages to the nearest Tribble inhabited space station -- Epsilon Nine -- wasn't so sure: "I've never come across any Klingon that sensed like these before...") just didn't stand a chance against it.

"And it's coming right this way," one of the station's communication tribbles reported after recovering from the initial shock of the sudden annihilation of one of its kind.

Chapter Two

With his long hair clinging to him in the heat of the Trulcan afternoon, Trok stood before the Trulcan Master Tribble -- who he had come to see about being accepted into The Most Ancient Order of the Little Breeders -- and wondered if it would have been such a bad thing to have stayed with Tum Tirk and the rest of the *Tribbleprise* clan when

they had had to abandon their Klingon ship so many cycles ago and return to Turth. Instead he had attempted to join with the Grand Master Tribble.

"Trok, son of Tarek of Trulcan and Tramanda of Turth, art thee prepared to open thy mind and join thy body with us?"

Trok sensed once again the enormous purring ball before him and the even bigger one which purred and mewed and trembled behind it. 'The Most Ancient Order of the Little Breeders.' -- It really didn't seem too stable a clan. -- Was this what he really wanted? A pure Trulcan joining and a lesser intake of food particles?

Oh, Tum, my thydtribble*! If only you hadn't eaten my share of the grain. I wouldn't have let my Turthian side take over, have gotten so annoyed and gone home.

"I am prepared," he quickly trilled, realizing that if he weren't careful he would let his Turthian side gain the upper hair. So much for all those days of careful meditation in the desert in preparation for this great moment. It really hadn't helped at all. He still felt the urge to eat all he could and the most illogical need for his old companions and Turthian clan.

"Here on the rocks where our forebears once bred..."

As the Trulcan Master Tribble harped on, Trok attempted to clear his mind for the ultimate joining. Forget Turth; think only of Trulcan. You were bred of a Trulcan clan, brought up as a Trulcan.

The Grand Master Tribble was just about to roll over and claim Trok for its own when It, the strange alien thing which was rapidly approaching the Trulcan planetary system, struck. The most painful and powerful hunger pangs Trok had ever encountered swept through him. Food! Food! came the cry and the most overwhelming need to fill his empty gurgling stomach.

"Trok, we felt It." The Grand Master rumbled. (The shock had almost dislodged several clusterings of Trulcans.) "Quickly - open your mind and let us join for one moment."

Trok could not refuse the Grand Master Tribble, and as they joined, all his thoughts and feelings were revealed.

FOOD! FOOD!

"It is clear," the Grand Master Tribble said

*Thydtribble -- Trulcan for lover. However, since Tirk and Trok often had disagreements, which leads to a lack of offspring, this led to some tribblation over whether they weren't. Admiral Tirk's comment: "Of course we were lovers. All tribbles are lovers; it's one of the main ingredients for propagation. Wherever did the humanoids get the idea that we weren't? As for lack of offspring, well, it can get overcrowded, even for us at times."

as it released Trok, "that your answer lies elsewhere."

Trok wanted to protest. Just because that thing somewhere wanted food and was broadcasting its message through him... But once the Grand Master Tribble had made up its mind, that was it.

Chapter Three

Admiral James T. Tirk, greatly reduced in size since having returned to Turth - where the grain shortage was just as great as on Trulcan - and now sporting a neat, curly, dark furred coat, was having difficulty in remaining inconspicuous in his adopted human's extremely close-fitting clothing.

Damn! These humans and their fashions, he thought. There was a time when we Tribbles didn't have to use our camouflage abilities and could travel quite comfortably.

So it was with great relief that as the human stepped out of the shuttle, Tirk found himself at Starfleet and Tribble Command H.Q. and could let himself fall discreetly into the nearest shopping bag to catch a lift in the general direction of the Tribble Admiralty and Admiral Trigura's office. He was halfway across the human terminal when he sensed Commander Tonak of Trulcan taking a ride on the back of a Vulcan.

"Commander Tonak!"

The Trulcan was so surprised at Tirk actually tribbling his name out in public instead of using a communications tribble that he lost his hold and fell - fortunately for both of them - right into the shopping bag in which Admiral Tirk was being transported.

"Have you been given the position of Science tribble onboard the *Tribbleprise* yet, Commander?" Tirk asked as the Trulcan found his particular right way up.

"Yes, Admiral," Tonak told him. "And I am honoured that you thought to recommend me, sir."

"Naturally." Tirk explained: "It was, to coin a purr, the logical thing to do. Trulcan Science tribbles who don't each much grain are invaluable. However, shouldn't you be onboard the ship?"

"Captain Trecker sent me on a final attempt to see the blueprints of the food processors, sir."

Admiral Tirk gave a squeak. "Then...the *Tribbleprise* - she's ready to leave?"

Different reasons, yet the same goal, Tirk purred to himself; and then noting there was another human heading in a more direct route to Admiral Trigura's office, he prepared to jump - not, however, without saying, "I'll see you later, Tonak, onboard ship."

"Onboard ship?" Tonak questioned, but the Admiral had already jumped and was being carried away in the hustle and bustle of the human crowd.

Chapter Four

Sometime later, after a brief interview with Admiral Trigura, Tirk found himself brushing furs with Mr. Thcott who had come to meet him as he had jumped off the human with whom he had transported up to the ship's dockyard complex.

"What's the latest concerning the ship's departure time, Mr. Thcott?" he had immediately asked as they hurried into a nearby vent to get out of the way of all the humans' tramping feet.

"The human engineer isn't too happy about the deadline, sir," Thcott told him. "Neither are our crew. We still haven't figured a way ta get inta all the new food processors an' it looks like it's going ta be a long trip."

"Then we'd better get started, hadn't we?" Tirk began looking for a possible human with whom to hitch a ride on the transporter.

"The transporter ta the ship's no working, Admiral," Thcott explained. "If yer wanting ta go across, it'll hae ta be with the next human that uses a travel pod or space suit."

"Hold on -- I can sense my human, Kirk!" Tirk exclaimed.

"Aye, an' my laddie as well. Come on, it appears they're going over."

Chapter Five

Inside the pod, after grumbling about "those damned uniforms", Tirk and Thcott were quick to jump off the humans' backs and take refuge in a dark corner.

"It's a real pleasure to be back in space again, Thcotty," Tum Tirk purred in pleasure.

"Aye, Admiral! But is it really wise for you to be taking this trip over to the ship? What if it leaves the dock? You'll be stuck onboard."

Tirk turned to him, and by his stance Thcott could see he was going to trill something important.

"I know I haven't been in the shafts for a number of cycles now, Thcotty, but I'm not that stale yet. In fact, they've given them back to me."

Thcott nearly rolled over backwards.

"This is an emergency, you see. A giant something or other is on course for Turth. We're in danger of it gobbling up all our food, and I have experience of these things."

"Ye dinna have ta explain any further, Admiral; a can sense it must've been a difficult decision for Trigura ta make."

"On the contrary. They were only too pleased to get rid of me!" $% \label{eq:contraction}%$

Chapter Six

Onboard the ship, Tirk found himself parted from his friend as Thcott and his human stayed in Engineering. Admittedly, the 'bridge' was where Tirk wanted to go, but it was a nerve-wracking experience riding up in the enormous turbo at a far from tribble speed.

The human-inhabited bridge: Tirk was now totally convinced that this was not the same ship he had been on before, despite the familiarity of certain humans. It was just not fit for tribblization.

"Admiral Tirk, sir," came a trill from somewhere.

Tirk sensed around. Where could it have come from?

"Sir..." He caught a glimpse of dark fur peeking out of one of the enormous human consoles. "In here."

Tirk quickly crawled up and followed the tribble inside. A minute or so later, they were in the bridge's main air vent shaft and Tirk was surrounded by familiar furs.

"We soon won't be able to get onto the 'bridge' shaft that way anymore, sir," Tuhura, now a Lieutenant Commander Communications tribble and as beautiful a dark haired tribble as ever, explained. "Everything's so streamlined out there that there are no nooks or crannies for us to utilise."

"And they keep on telling me that this is the *Tribbleprise*." Tirk grumbled, then he put on a pleasant purr and said, "It's really lovely to sense you all again, though."

"The feeling is mutual," Tuhura trilled back.
"The *Tribbleprise* clan just hasn't been the same since you left."

There was a muffled squeak as one of the lower ranking tribbles was cut off from making the comment: "Yes, we've been better fed!" Tuhura went on to say, "Tribble Command H.Q. have just signalled your transfer of command, sir. Congratulations!"

"Yes, and welcome back, sir," Commander Tulu and Thekov, who was now a full lieutenant and held the position of Chief of Tribble Security, squeaked.

"Thank you. I just wish the circumstances were a little less critical." $% \label{eq:continuous}%$

Extracting himself from their friendly embraces, he turned to Tuhura. "Outpost Station Epsilon Nine is keeping a sensory organ on the human reports on the intruder. Keep your sensors open."

"Aye, sir!" Tuhura acknowledged.

Tirk sensed around the 'bridge' shaft again. It was extremely crowded and he couldn't make out the tribble he was looking for, though he had no doubts that if Trecker had been there he would have known about it by now.

"Where is Captain Trecker?" he queried.

Tulu broke the silence that followed. "He's down in the food processor on the main rec. deck with Mr. Thcott... He doesn't know."

"Captain," Tuhura interrupted.

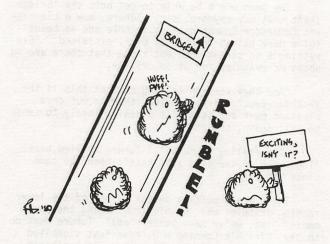
"Ms Tuhura?"

"I've been monitoring the conversation on the human bridge. There's to be a meeting on the rec. deck at 04.00 Hrs. and the human admiral is going to show his crew the intruder."

"Thank you, Ms Tuhura. Mr. Thekov, see to it that every tribble onboard this ship is assembled down there in time."

Chapter Seven

A long crawl, roll and drop later (with the help of a junior navigator tribble), Tirk found himself in the interior of the food processor where Mr. Thcott and one very oily young blond tribble - Captain Trecker - were busy working away.



Thcott sensed Tirk first, and realizing what was to pass between the two tribbles, got out of their way. There was no telling how Trecker might react.

"Admiral Tirk," Trecker said, sensing the admiral at his side. "This is an honour, Tribble Command actually sending you to wish us luck on this mission."

"Er...Twill," Tirk started rather nervously.

"With all due respect, sir, I hope this isn't a Tribble Command pep talk. I'm just too busy..."

"I'm taking over the clan," Tirk said quickly, better to get it over and done with. "I'm sorry, Twill."

"You are what?!" Trecker just couldn't believe his sensory organs.

"I'm replacing you as Captain of the $\mathit{Tribble-prise}$ clan."

There was an unnerving silence. Twill Trecker appeared to have lost every trill or treble he had ever had.

"You'll stay onboard as Executive Officer - with a temporary grade reduction to Commander."

"Trecker found his trill cords again. "You personally are assuming command?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

"My experience," Tirk explained. "Several long tribble cycles out there dealing with potential grain snatches like this. My rapport with the clan..."

"Admiral, these are new shafts and vents, food processors and breeding grounds. You don't know them one-third as well as I do."

"That's why you're staying onboard, Twill. I'm sorry."

No, Admiral," Trecker squeaked, fluffing himself out in anger. I don't think you are. Not one little bit. I remember when you recommended me for this clan. You told me how envious you were, how tribble it was to have no way to get a tribbleship clan again. Well, sir, it looks like you found a way."

Tirk fought back the urge to sob. Trecker really made him feel like a Klingon. But getting himself under control, he ordered Trecker to report to the 'bridge'.

Trecker went, purrless and trilless. If it hadn't been for the sudden emergency treble that Chief Tribble Co-ordinator Janice Trand sent him just then, Tirk was sure he would have broken down in front of his old friend, Thcotty. If only Trok were there, silent and supportive...

"Tum, come on," Th<ott reminded him that Trand was calling.

They found the Tribble Co-ordinator sobbing near the open vent in the transporter room shaft.

"Oh! Captain, Mr. Thcott. I gave them the go ahead to transport up with a Vulcan and a human, and now they're dead."

"Ms. Trand, control yourself," Tirk told her whilst attempting to send a soothing trill.

Eventually they managed to calm the distressed tribble and discovered what had happened. There had been a transporter malfunction while a Vulcan and a human and two tribbles were beaming up. Tonak and, of all tribbles, an ex-breeding partner of Tirk's, Tlori...

Chapter Eight

Tirk wandered off down the shaft, leaving Thcotty to assure Trand that it wasn't hers or the human's fault. Tlori - why had she come onboard? Had his reputation for finding large grain holds attracted her need to feed and breed again? Tonak, a great loss... He set about pulling himself together again. This was no time to brood. He had to put aside personal loss. They had a mission to carry out, a mission and... HE WAS LOST!

If it hadn't been for the yeotribble that came along and directed him to a shaft, he was sure he would have panicked. And there was Trecker at the entrance of the upward shaft. It just didn't bear thinking about. The only tribbles he had ever let himself panic in front of were his old senior officers

"We'll have to find a replacement for Commander Tonak," Tirk said to Trecker. "A Trulcan if possible.

"There are none available, Captain," Trecker told him flatly. "In fact, there are no tribbles of any kind familiar with this ship's design."

"You are, Mr. Trecker," Tirk said. "You'll have to double as Science tribble as well then."

Tirk moved up the shaft, aware of Trecker's sensory organs following him. Was the new Exec. waiting for him to fall down the shaft? Wouldn't he, Tirk, have been resentful if all those cycles ago some tribble had taken his first clan? Tirk had to agree that he would have; after all, as Captain, Trecker would have been entitled to a larger share of the grain and breeding area.

Chapter Nine

The rec. deck. After collecting his 'bridge' staff - consisting of Tuhura, Tulu and Thekov - Tirk made his way down the shaft again. It was a long, tiring journey and it made him realize that he wasn't as young a tribble as he used to be. Unfortunately, although the humans' rec. deck was enormous, the air shafts weren't. There wasn't even any ceiling space to cling to, and it didn't help Tirk's temper to have to balance himself on top of his officers.

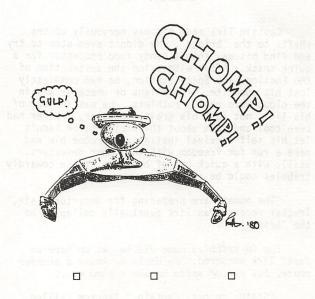
"Why, Captain Tirk!" a familiar trill came from beneath him.

"Ms Thapel?"

"That's right, sir. How are you? And do you realize that as Chief Medical Tribble onboard this ship, you have to report to me for your medical

before we embark on this mission? Only healthy breeders are allowed onboard and..."

"Ssshhh!" several of the tribble crew hissed; outside on the rec. deck, the human Admiral and his staff had arrived.



"How tribble!" was the reaction the crew felt upon receiving impressions of the Klingon ship's destruction.

"And it only confirms our fears that the thing is gobbling its way to Turth." Captain Tirk went on to say to his crew, "And our mission is to tag along with the *Tribbleprise* and find out what manner of invader lives within that cloud and, if it is a potential grainer, to try and persuade it to eat elsewhere. If we can't, then despite the fact that the grain and other food sources are not yet readily available onboard this ship, we must put the prime directive into force: we must go forth and multiply and multiply and if there's anything edible for us in there, eat it!"

Tirk's speech was a great success and resulted in the first few bars of 'Keep the granaries flowing and the population growing', but Tuhura, being a communications tribble of great sensitivity, drew their attention to the fact that the humans as well as she were receiving a communication from Space Station Epsilon Nine.

Putting her communication on her open frequency, Captain Tirk and his crew got an audio if not a visual message.

"Lieutenant Commander Tranch here. The intruder is still on course for Turth, passing the station within sensor and human visible range."

"Yes, yes, we can sense it, Tranch," Tirk reported, having tuned in his sensory organs with the human projection on the viewscreen on the rec. deck.

"We're transmissing tribblecode friendship messages coinciding with the humans'."

There was a silence from Tranch, who was aware they were following the humans' broadcast, and then he, as well as the human, reported they were under attack.

Chapter Ten

Captain Tirk made his way nervously up the shafts to the 'bridge'. He didn't even stop to try and find his way into a handy food processor for a quick snack. After witnessing the destruction of the Epsilon Nine Space Station, he had completely lost his appetite. The aliens or whatever was in the cloud were really ruthless. He was in fear of his life, not just his grain. However, Trecker had been cool and calm about the incident; he hadn't let his self-survival instincts overcome him and make a run for freedom with the other deserters. Still, with a quick bit of breeding, those cowardly tribbles could be replaced.

"The humans are preparing for departure, sir," Trecker reported as Tirk eventually collapsed on the 'bridge'.

How in tribbles name did he get up here so fast? Tirk wondered. No doubt he knows a shorter route, but out of spite he won't show me...

"Status report, Captain," Trecker trilled.
"We have forty percent access to the food processors and seventy percent of the shafts under population. Estimate a full crew in approximately one breeding cycle."

"Very good, Mr. Trecker. It looks like we're all set to go." $\,$

"Captain," Tuhura said, "tribble co-ordinator Trand reports tribble navigator Tilia is now on-board and making her way up the shafts to report in on the 'bridge'."

Tirk sensed Trecker give a start.

"She's a Telltale," Tuhura added. Which explained all.

Telltales, the highly advanced race of hairless tribbles, were renowned for their abilities to stimulate breeding and for their voracious appetites. No wonder Trecker had given an uncontrollable tremble.

The first thing the beautiful* Telltale trilled as she joined them in the already over-crowded 'bridge' shaft (Tirk would have to order the bridge crew to reduce their grain snacks) was: "I have sworn my oath of propagation." And then she proceeded to jump on Commander Twill Trecker.

"Lieutenant Tilia and I have met before, sir," Trecker was quick to explain, noting the disapproving ruffle on Tirk's body. (After all, he was now the Captain and an Admiral and she should have chosen to jump on him.)

*Any tribble that is a good breeder is known as beautiful.

"That's obvious," Tirk said. "However, this is one of those emergencies, lieutenant, in which we must control our biological heritage and not propagate because these shafts are too crowded as it is."

"Aye, sir." She tumbled off the commander, who gave a trill of relief.

"Captain," Tuhura interrupted (being a Communications tribble meant you could - interrupt, that is!). "Tribble Co-ordinator Trand reports that our last six crew tribbles are onboard and that we might be interested to learn that one of them is Doctor McTroy."

"McTroy!" Tirk could hardly believe his luck - as well as his sensory organs. Having Boneless onboard meant he had that side to lean on again.

"Boneless, it's good to sense you!" He went to help the doctor up the last few tribble inches of shaft.

"Phah! If it hadn't been for the fact that my human was drafted and I inadvertently got myself trapped in his suitcase, I wouldn't be here!"

"Never mind. I'm really trilled to see you."

"Bet they've changed all the food processors around as well," McTroy grumbled. "And what's this about Thapel being a Medical tribble now? I need a nurse, not a doctor who'll be wanting to eat as much grain as me."

Chapter Eleven

Tirk took up a more comfortable position near the main observation vent on the 'bridge' as the *Tribbleprise* was about to leave dock and tuned in on all the activity on the human bridge, especially with his human, Kirk, who was sitting in the new command chair. It made Tirk rather nostalgic for the Klingon ship he had temporarily commanded* and its command chair. Still that chair out there was of no use to a tribble. Not enough nooks to rest in and so easy to roll out of. He was definitely better off on his own 'bridge'.

The *Tribbleprise* slowly and majestically slipped out of its dock and the human captain ordered impulse power.

"Oh, it's really tribbling to be actually in space again!" Tuhura trilled, unable to contain her excitement. Most of the crew felt the same way and the seriousness and danger of their mission was momentarily forgotten as they trilled and purred happily together in anticipation of the great granaries they might find.

*"The Trouble With Humans" in *Enter-comm 3*. Write to Canadian Contingent Press; 1068 Bathgate Drive; Ottawa, Ontario K1J 8E8 Canada for availability.

Sometime later, McTroy, who had located Doctor Thapel and then gone down to inspect his breeding ground on the ship -- the medical section shafts -- came grumbling up to the 'bridge'.

"And?" Tirk asked as he and Lieutenant Thekov helped the doctor up those last few tribbling tribble inches of upward shaft. (So much for Boneless being a side to lean on!) "Do the new medical shafts and vents meet with your approval?"

"They do not," he told them with an emphatic shake of his body. "It's going to be like living in a collection of inter-connecting test tubes! I sincerely hope that after this mission is over we get the chance of getting out of here. The Klingon ship had better breeding grounds than this."

"Captain," Trecker reported, "the humans are preparing to go into warpdrive."

"Mr. Thcott confirms, sir," Tuhura said. "He also says he doesn't like the look of that thing down in engineering, and can he and the lads please go and engineer elsewhere?"

"Request denied. We're short of space as it $\ensuremath{^{\circ}}$ is. He'll have to do the best he can."

The floor beneath them began to vibrate and outside, in the human-inhabited ship, the klaxon struck up.

"What on Turth is going on out there?" Tirk asked of Trecker, who was the nearest to the main observation vent.

"It's...it's..."

A gust of warm air suddenly struck them, almost blowing them down the shaft.

"Mole hole effect, sir," Trecker squealed as they all clung desperately on to the floor, walls and ceiling. Unfortunately, Boneless, who wasn't quite in condition after his long spell of unproductivity on Turth, was swept away.

"B - O - N - E - L - E - S - S..." Tirk squeaked, his trill distorted by the mole hole effect. Then he focussed on Trecker. "TRECKER - YOU - YOU - HAVE COMMAND. I'LL - GO - FIND - HIM..."

"NO!" Trecker exclaimed, sounding very uptight and extremely hysterical about the whole thing. "NO! I - CAN'T - FOLLOW - THAT - ORDER..."

Tirk couldn't believe his ears (wherever they might be). What did Commander Trecker think he was doing, refusing to follow his orders. But before the captain could think of anything to say, Trecker had let go and was being blown down the shaft after the doctor.

Some hair-raising time later, the air-current went down and they all trilled in relief.

"They've gotten the ship out of it!" Thekov explained from where he was clinging on to the observation vent.

"Is everybody all right?" Tirk asked as he dropped from the ceiling and landed next to a ruffled Tuhura.

"Yes, Captain," Tuhura reported, relieved to be back in communication with the crew again.

"No, they are not," came a familiar grumbling tribble up the shaft. "My brood, as in frightened out of, Captain, sir! Now you will have to allocate me some extra shaft space!"

Tirk suppressed the urge to groan a very human groan; instead he turned his sensors on Trecker, who had appeared behind the doctor.

"Mr. Trecker, I'd like to see you in my personal shaft. Mr. Tulu, the clan is yours."

"Do you mind if I tag along?" McTroy asked; and as he was clinging rather viciously to one of Tirk's sides, there was really no way of shaking him off.

"Was it really necessary for you to set up home in the human captain's shafts and vents, Tum?" McTroy puffed after his long crawl down.

"Of course," Tirk told him. "It's the status, plus the room, plus -- I've got my sensors on that there particular piece of equipment which could well be a food processor of sorts."

"Is that why you wanted to see me, Captain?" Trecker asked.

"No, it is not. I want to know just what in tribbles' name you were doing refusing to obey my orders and going after McTroy like that?!"

"I'm sorry, sir, if I made you lose some fur, but I do know the shafts and vents onboard this ship better than you. You might have gotten lost and never found Doctor McTroy again."

"He's right, Tum," McTroy agreed. "I can't even find my way into a food processor any more."

"If I may have permission to speak freely, sir?" Trecker asked.

Tirk shook himself in acknowledgement and was pleased to feel he had dislodged McTroy.

"Sir, you haven't bagged any grain for thirty full tribble cycles. That, plus your unfamiliarity with the shafts and vents, and not being able to tell the difference between a food processor and a piece of equipment, in my opinion seriously jeopardizes our mission."

Tirk resisted the temptation to jump on Trecker. There was a difference in age and size, so instead he said in a rather strained treble, "Then I trust you will help feed me and find me throughout this mission, Mr. Trecker."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

As Trecker disappeared up the shaft and out of sensor range, Tirk quietly jumped up and down in rage.

"Tum! Tum! Calm down," McTroy soothed.

"If it wasn't for the fact that I knew his clan and that I needed a first officer and science tribble, I'd have him banished to the empty storage holds!"

"I know, I know. But he is right in a way."

McTroy was spared the wrath of the captain - who was going to jump on him as well - by the time-ly trill of Tuhura.

"Humanoid Federation vessel has just docked with the *Tribbleprise*, sir."

"So what," Tirk said sulkily.

"There could be a tribble onboard, sir," she pointed out.

"Very well. Send Mr. Thekov down. He's supposed to be the chief of tribble security; about time he started earning his grain."

"Come on, Tum." McTroy ushered Tirk toward the downward shaft. "I think it's about time you got some of that grain yourself."

"Yes, you're right, Boneless, old friend. I'm sorry I was so Klingon. It's the pressures of command and the lack of nourishment. Do you realize I haven't had a nibble since I came onboard?"

Chapter Twelve

Thekov couldn't believe his sensors as the airlock doors slid open and the half-Vulcan called Spock strode in, accompanied by a discretely hidden Trulcan who, on finding himself safely onboard, dropped to the deck.

"Mr. Trok!" Thekov trilled in delight on sensing the pointy haired Trulcan. "Mr. Trok, welcome aboard, sir."

But the Trulcan just stayed where he was and ignored him.

"Sir?"

Finally, after a great deal of effort to control his nausea (had it really been necessary for the Vulcan to show off his piloting abilities by doing a somersault before they had docked?), Trok turned to Thekov.

"Mr. Thekov, where is the shaft up to the 'bridge'?"

Even you, a Trulcan, can't make out the complexity of the air vent system, thought Thekov.

The silence that met Trok's dramatic entrance on the 'bridge' was unnerving until the ever-emotional Tirk got carried away and trilled. "Trok, Trok -- Oh, Trok, where have you been?!"

But Trok made no move to rub furs; instead he trilled very formally and unemotionally. "I have

been monitoring your tribble communications and I am aware of your food and space problems. I offer my services as Science tribble."

Tum Tirk was only too glad to have him back, and Trecker didn't object to losing his Science tribble rating. Let the Trulcan feed and find the captain when he got himself lost!

"If I could be directed to the nearest nonoperational food processor?" asked Trok.

Mr. Thekov, who had only just arrived rather breathlessly on the 'bridge', now found himself on the way down again. All this exercise without enough time to eat and breed made him wonder if he would survive the mission.

McTroy and Thapel came up to the 'bridge' after Thekov and the Trulcan left.

"We just met Trok in the downward shaft, Tum," McTroy throbbed. "What's wrong with him?"

"Yes," Thapel said with an upset trill, "he just crawled right over us!"

"Well, I know why he's not communicating with me," Tirk said. "I accidentally ate his grain the last time we were together. As for you..."

"Yeah, well, we never did get on," McTroy said.

"And he was always afraid I'd upset his cycle," Thapel added.

"He'll come around," Tirk said with a confident trill.

Chapter Thirteen

With Trok onboard, it was only a matter of time till they had access to all the food processors and a number of new shafts and vents. Outside, in the human inhabited world, they now had full warp drive.

"So it's definitely a grainer of sorts?" Tirk said, having persuaded Trok to explain why he had really gone to all the trouble of getting himself onboard the *Tribbleprise*.

"Most assuredly, Captain. I can sense its need for food all the time." $\ \ \,$

"And you?" McTroy asked, his interest as Chief Medical Tribble in evidence.

"I too have sensed hunger," Trok confessed, "but the mind controls. *There is no hunger*."

So that's why he was behaving so peculiarly, Tirk thought.

"Well, you better make sure you do control

it," \mbox{McTroy} stated. "We can't have you eating all our available food."

Before Trok could forget about the need to control his/their hunger pangs and losing his Trulcan cool with the doctor, the humans sounded the Red Alert. All three tribbles quickly hurried over to the open vent which led out of the human officers lounge and into the shafts.

"I knew we shouldn't have come in here," Mc-Troy squeaked anxiously as they found the vent closed.

"Trok?" Tirk asked. "Trok, what's happened?"

"Evidently the closing of the open vents is a part of security procedure."

"But it didn't happen last time."

"Who cares about last time!" McTroy exclaimed. "What about now?"

"We shall just have to wait," Trok said with a controlled purr. Then he gave an uncharacteristic tremble.

"Trok?" Tirk asked in concern.

"I sense it - so much closer now."

"Oh, Mummy!" If only I had stayed at home..."
Tum Tirk started to squeak. With Trok and Boneless
there, it felt just like old times; Tirk could let
himself go to pieces. And if ever there was a time
to go to pieces, it was now.

But before Trok or McTroy could consider doing anything about their hysterical captain, there was a hair-raising shriek (No, it wasn't Tirk) as the *Tribbleprise* was shaken by a powerful bolt of energy sent out by the cloud.

When McTroy regained consciousness, he found that the vent was open, Tum was still stunned out of his tiny mind and Trok - whose super-sensitive hearing just hadn't been able to take the noise - was unconscious.

"Tum! Tum!" McTroy had no choice but to jump on his captain a few times to get him moving.

"I'm all right now!" he squeaked before the doctor could jump on him again.

"Good. Now let's get Trok into the vent before we find ourselves locked out again."

Inside, they found the shafts in utter chaos. The shock waves had produced many a new brood, and Doctor Thapel was rounding them up while Trecker, as Chief Exec. tribble, was assigning them temporary positions.

McTroy, concerned about the Trulcan's health, was quick to have him carried down to the sickbay shaft while Tirk went up to the 'bridge', where

Tuhura, who had been quick to tune in with the humans once the vents had re-opened, gave him a report: the ship had been attacked - as the Klingons and the Space Station had been - but they had been saved from total destruction by the timely sending of a human friendship message. They were now going into It.

Chapter Fourteen

Tirk felt quite weak as he stood next to the observation vent and sensed the frantic activity on the human bridge. Never before had Tribblekind ever encountered anything as alien as this...

"Captain," Tuhura shrilled in warning.

Tirk jumped back just in time as the open vent he was standing next to slid shut with a clatter.

"We must be under attack again!"

But it was all quiet on the tribble front.

"Tuhura?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't tune in. We're in the dark."

And so began their V-A-G-U-E journey. And what with an unconscious Trulcan down in the sickbay shaft, Tirk thought he would never eat or breed again.

 $\it Eat!$ He suddenly thought of the food processors. Were they still accessible to his crew? If they weren't, they would all slowly starve to death!

"Lieutenant Tilia," he ordered, attempting to keep his treble under control, "go and check out what food processors are still available."

"Aye, sir," she trilled in acknowledgement and was gone.

Shortly thereafter, much to Tirk's relief, Trok regained consciousness and joined him on the 'bridge'. However, as is often the case, just as one problem was solved, another took its place.

"I can't understand it, sir," Trecker rumbled, unable to control his concern, "Tilia's a first class navigator, how can she have gotten lost?"

"Perhaps I can be of some assistance," Trok offered. "We *must* find a way out of these shafts. How else are we to make contact with It." He purred thoughtfully. "Perhaps Lieutenant Tilia has already done so."

MORE V - A - G - U - E - N - E - S - S

Not a squeak was heard from Tilia, and then Trok just happened to go missing as well.

"Oh, Boneless!" Tirk trilled and trebled, oblivious to the fact that Commander Trecker was still on the 'bridge'. Trecker wasn't paying any attention to his commanding officer though; he was

too busy having an hysterical outburst of his own. Poor Tilia, where could the Telltale be?

Chapter Fifteen

It was Lieutenant Thekov, Chief of Tribble Security and sent out after Trok, who found Tilia.

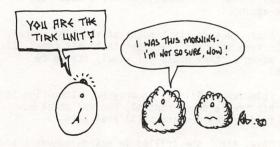
"Captain," he reported, having beat a hasty retreat up to the 'bridge' with his security tribbles, "I've found Lieutenant Tilia, but there's something different about her."

"Boneless, Mr. Trecker, come with me," Tirk ordered. He would have also ordered half the tribble population to go with them had there been room.

The three of them went to find her.

It wasn't only the strange little red light bulb on Tilia's otherwise unblemished body that made them cling rather nervously to each other; it was the way she crawled toward them, throbbing and trilling in a completely untribble voice.

"YOU - ARE - THE - TIRK - UNIT?"



"What's happened to her?" Trecker squeaked with a sob.

"Hush!" McTroy soothed with a nervous purr, whilst Tirk (who at times could really be very brave when confronted by something horribly untribble), fluffed himself out and pulled himself up to his full three inches.

"I'm Captain James T. Tirk, Commanding the ${\it Tribble prise}$ clan."

"I - HAVE - BEEN - PROGRAMMED - TO - TAKE - YOU - INTO - MY - CREATOR," the strange Tilia said in an electronic trill.

"Programmed? What have you done to Tilia?" Trecker asked, sounding as hysterical as his captain could be at times.

"THAT - FURLESS - UNIT - NO - LONGER - EXISTS."

Chapter Sixteen

**FOOD! -- Trok had fought against the over-whelming urge to seek out those empty stomachs, but it had grown too great, and in the depths of the ship's shafts there had been no tribble to help him. Forgetting about his mission to find Lieutenant Tilia, he frantically sought a way out. He found one; unfortunately, the open vent led directly into an airlock where his adopted Vulcan just happened to be climbing into a space suit. In his half-'food' crazed mind, he jumped in. Immediately he realized his mistake, but it was too late.

It had been hot and murky in there, with not enough room for even a tribble to move. He had never suffered from claustrophobia in his life, but being in a far from one hundred percent Trulcan state of mind, on finding he was trapped with no means of escape, Trok lost his Trulcan sense of cool. Fortunately, the Vulcan himself was so fascinated with what was happening outside that he didn't notice one little Trulcan, tribbling and trebling and shrieking for help.

Thekov was on patrol with his Security tribles, seeking Trok and, at the same time, a way out of their confinement (Tribbles are just not used to being confined to one particular place, and there was also the danger of running out of food).

V - A - G - U - E - N - E - S - S was also beginning to get them down. Captain Tirk, Dr. Mc-Troy, and Commander Trecker were desperately trying to obtain information out of Tilia; however, all they got was that at the right time, she, the Tilia probe, would take them into the creator.

It was Thekov who stumbled across the very battered and unconscious body of the Trulcan, who had somehow gotten back onboard the *Tribbleprise* with the Vulcan, crawled out of the abandoned space suit, and had collapsed just outside the open vent in the airlock.

Chapter Seventeen

"Will he be all right, Boneless?" Tirk asked as Doctor Thapel allowed him back into the sickbay shaft. She just wasn't going to let the captain in while he was crying - it upset the other patients - so he had forced himself to control the heart-rending sobs he had been emitting.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" McTroy purred rahher smugly, having managed to bring the Trulcan out of his state of shock. A few careful jumps on a patient could, at times, work wonders.

Tirk hurried over to Trok's side. "Trok?"

"Yes, but Trok," Tirk clung to his Trulcan friend, "Boneless says that because of the shock, you're going to have twins!"

The Trulcan returned Tum's friendly cling with a hug and a happy purr. "Yes, Tum. Isn't it just wonderful? At last I have achieved what I have always wanted: the ability to propagate in multiples."

"Oh, Trok, I'm so happy for you!"

"Captain Tirk," Tuhura interrupted. She had just climbed all the way down from the 'bridge', and although she was pleased to see that the Trulcan had been found and appeared to be all right, she had a personal message to deliver.

Tirk released the happy purring Trulcan and turned to her.

"Ms Tuhura?"

"Communication from that vague Tilia probe. The humans are preparing to go outside into It.

Tirk felt the beginnings of panic. In the excitement of getting Trok back and the news about his new breeding abilities, he had forgotten all about the Tilia probe and It. He decided to take a ride with the humans.

Swallowing hard and fighting down panic, he trilled in McTroy's direction. "Boneless, I'll need you $\ensuremath{\mathit{and}}$ Trok."

As he followed Tuhura toward the nearest upward shaft, leaving the others to follow, he heard McTroy say: "Doctor Thapel, 10cc's of quadrotriticale."

It was one of the advantages of being in sick-bay.

Chapter Eighteen

Sometime later, after the Tilia probe had used her super-untribble powers to bore a way out of the sealed air vent in the maintenance shaft whence the humans were preparing to leave - resulting in Boneless' famous "I'm a tribble not a Horta" remark - Tirk, Trok, McTroy, and Trecker (who had insisted he be allowed to accompany them; after all, he was the Exec. tribble and was just as entitled to any grain that they might find), followed the Tilia probe into the nearest available human's clothing.

"Well, I must admit these pockets are the best thing we've come across on this mission, Tum" Mc-Troy said as they rested comfortably in the human captain's jacket.

"Indeed, Doctor," Trok agreed. "Very spacious."

"How can you two sit there discussing the merits of a pocket while we could be being led to our deaths!" Tirk squeaked in annoyance.

After a long, bumpy journey following Tilia's electronically trilled order, they abandoned the relative sanctuary and safety of the pocket and came to land on a most peculiar landscape.

"Honeycombs?" McTroy suggested?

"No, granaries," Tirk said as he surveyed the area with his sensors. "Mile upon mile of them." He was just about to exclaim, "We're rich!" when he noticed the humans disappearing over the horizon. "We will be able to get a ride back to the ship, won't we?" he trilled nervously.

"Never mind about that, Tum!" McTroy said. "Just sense at this!"

Tirk quickly scurried after the others. What could they have found to have made them forget how dangerous it was outside, here in the open?

"What is it, Boneless, Trok?"

"On the molecular structure next to this one."

Tirk sensed around and found what the others had. Letting his curiosity overtake his usual caution, he jumped onto it.

"Tum, be careful!"

"I'ts all right, Trok. Why don't you come over? You'll never believe what it is!"

"What is it?" McTroy asked as he sensed Trok jumping over.

"Letters," Tirk told him in awe, "old style tribble letters."

"Indeed, extremely old," Trok agreed. "Many cycles have passed since we outgrew our limbs and evolved into what we are today."

"Let's see if we can make out what they say."
Tirk slowly began to rub against the writing.

T'KILROY WAS HERE

"T'Kilroy!" Tirk exclaimed. The name rang a bell somewhere.

"T'Kilroy," Trok trilled in open wonder.

"Do you know what it means?" McTroy asked from where he still stood with Trecker and the Tilia probe on the adjoining structure.

"Fascinating ... "

"Trok?!"

"Do you not recall the ancient Trulcan legend, Captain? T'Kilroy was supposedly a pre-reform Trulcan, renowned for her ability to propagate. Legend has it that she hitched a ride on a passing space vehicle and was never sensed or heard from again."

"THE - CREATOR - SAYS - YOU - WILL - ASSIST."

"Assist in what?" McTroy enquired, his suspicions aroused.

"IN - FEEDING - AND - IN - CONTROLLING - THE BREEDING."

There was a tribble second of silence as the implication of her words sank in.

"All those hunger pangs you felt, Trok," Tirk trebled.

"Oh, great Tribble!" McTroy exclaimed. "They must be around here somewhere. T'Kilroy's descendants. And do you realize how long they have been here and--?"

"If she lived up to that legend," Trok finished for him in a trill that was almost a squeak, "and her descendants have inherited her ability to propagate--."

"YOU - WILL ASSIST."

But Tirk, Trok and McTroy were already scurrying across the molecular structures on the direction the humans had disappeared. Would they come back in time for them to hitch a ride?

"You can't just leave Tilia like this,"
Trecker frantically squeaked after the retreating
tribbles. (He had grown used to her new trill, and
even the little red light bulb didn't bother him
any more. He just didn't want to accept the fact
that she in fact no longer existed.)

"We'll never find them!" McTroy shrieked in anguish. "Never."

"Oh, life is so cruel..." Tirk joined in. But he never got the chance to break down. The whole world, the whole universe decided to do it for him.

Chapter Nineteen

Trok said afterward that they would never know precisely what the humans had done during the end part of the mission to save human and tribble kind, but whatever it was had inadvertently released the door on T'Kilroy's descendants.

Commander Trecker and the Tilia probe were never seen again. They disappeared under the hail of a million Trulcan tribbles' bodies. Tirk, Trok and McTroy, who had managed to cling to each other during all the upheaval, were fortunately thrown into orbit alongside a most peculiar-looking space vessel.

Chapter Twenty

"This really is most untribble," Tirk trilled unhappily. "One moment the commander of the *Tribbleprise* clan onboard a real ship; the next, relegated to taking command of this *thing*!"

"I believe it is called the *Voyager Six*, Tum," Trok told him.

Several tribble cycles later, one rather heavy and bulky vehicle crash-landed on Turth's moon. Meanwhile, out in space where a new life form had evolved...

THE TRIBBLE ADVENTURE HAD JUST BEGUN!

paradox

Lord of Darkness, Power, Might Greet the fragile steed in White Past to Present - a long Abyss Soul betrayed and gone amiss

Deep within the armoured chest Hidden by the helmet crest More fragile than a wind-blown kiss Your Sith heart cries out: "I exist." I am, I feel, I long to see -To love, to have the future be."

The gentle beast has heard your plea, Lord Darth, she nibbles at your knee And frees you for Eternity!

June Edwards



Slow Boat to

Bespin

from an idea by A Cartynn

illustrated by A Cartynn

VERSION ONE: as it could have happened VERSION TWO: as it probably occurred

Slow Boat to Bespin₁

Anne Elizabeth Zeek

a Circle of Fire story

"You do have your moments," Leia said. "Not many," she added with a teasing smile, "but you do have them." She hesitated a moment, then gave Han a soft kiss on the cheek. Thankful for the quiet, for the lack of complaints, she left C-3PO turned off. She reseated herself in the communicator's chair behind Han. Deliberately, she kept her eyes on the slow-moving star-field visible through the canopy. If Han laughed, or cracked a joke...

But the Corellian seemed to have his mind on other things than mockery. He pressed a button, then switched on the intercom. "Chewie, while you're down there, check out the, uh, the auxiliary power cables. See if you can realign the--"

"Crealorgh leirslgh frear?!!"

Even to Leia's untutored ears, the Wookiee's comment rang with disbelief. She flicked a glance at Han, then tore her eyes away quickly. Was that a--she risked another direct glance at him. Then she smiled and settled back further in her seat. Yes, it was. Hot-shot Solo was actually blushing. This trip might prove rather interesting after all.

"Just take care of that like I said, Chewie," Han said through gritted teeth. "And do it thor-

oughly. Don't bother me for, oh," he turned his head, met Leia's guileless gaze, "for at least the next few hours."

"Leiaiorgh roilgh -- "

Whatever Chewbacca had been saying was lost when Han flipped off the controls of the comset. He swung his seat around to face Leia, then smiled the soft, slow smile that had been haunting her, infuriating her, for the past three years. "And now, Leia-my-sweet, I--"

She put a hand, still gloved, over his mouth. "Han, I don't--" $\,$

He took her hand in his. "Sshh. I know. But don't say a word. Not now. For once, Leia, lovely Leia, be simply that. Lovely Leia."

She looked down at her hand, imprisoned in his. To be but Leia. Not Leia the Princess/Senator Organa. Not Leia the commander of an outpost of the Alliance forces. To be--just Leia. She raised her eyes to meet Han's steady gaze. "I'd like that," she said simply.

The smile Han gave her held nothing of mockery,



nor of victory. He leaned forward. With his free hand he cupped her head, exerted the slightest hint of pressure until she was leaning into his kiss. It was soft, gentle, cool. Singularly undemanding.

He released her hand, only to frame her face with both of his. Drawing back somewhat, he studied her closely, as though memorizing the changes since last they'd been this close. So much time since then. So many deaths. Llangerol...

Her thoughts must have been mirrored on her face. Han frowned, and traced a finger down the side of her cheek. "No, Leia. Not now. Don't even think about the last three years. Just be."

She started to shift back into her seat and his hands were on her shoulders, holding her where she was. She shook her head. "I can't. I--"

Han gave her a small shake. "Stop rebelling it up, for this bit at least, Leia. You're so busy fighting, you forget to be a woman." The look he gave her was compassionate, wryly knowing. "Your damn 'cause' stole your childhood, Princess. Don't let it rob you now, too."

The smile started with his eyes and slowly lit his face. Leia felt her sense of purpose slipping away.

"Forget the damn rebellion, Leia. You can't do anything about it now, anyway, until we get to Bespin. So let it lie. Forget everything. Everything but \underline{us} ."

To forget the deaths, the maiming. To forget the running, the last-ditch fighting. To forget the doubts. How many more deaths, Leia? And all on your head. How many deaths before your right becomes as bad as their wrong? And what the hell makes your right right to begin with?

She took a deep breath, shook her head again. She'd found the strength and succor she'd needed in his arms once before, after the Death Star--and Alderaan. And both of them had been running from the memory of that night ever since. For Han it'd been even worse. She'd never let him forget Massassi. Or Llangerol, and Chalil's death. And to use him again, simply for comfort... "Han, I don't--"

He silenced her once more, this time with his lips. She sighed. Clutching his shoulders, she gave herself to his kiss. The kiss grew deeper, and Leia opened her mouth under the soft insistence of his tongue. His mouth tasted of ice and citrus fruit, and in one corner of her mind she wondered if she tasted as fresh and clean to him.

It was almost as though he heard her thoughts, because he slowly pulled away from her. He sat there quietly, hands still on her shoulders, smiling across at her as intimately as though they were occupying the Imperial bridal suite. And were there quite alone, with no Wookiee, no droid apt to interrupt.

Still smiling, Han reached one hand out to her face, lightly skimmed the tips of his fingers over her skin. He traced the slant of her eyebrow, tucked a straying strand of hair behind her ear,

followed the line of her jaw down to her neck. His eyes imprisoned hers as his fingers ran lightly around the rim of her collar to the hollow of her neck, then back to her shoulder.

Leia's heart began to beat more rapidly, and she felt her breath come faster. Han's hands on her shoulders were insistent, and she flowed with them almost without thinking. In one fluid movement he brought her to her feet and across to his lap, where she straddled him.

His mouth engulfed hers. The smoothness of his lips, his tongue against her own... Leia put her arms around Han's neck, confident that this time, at least, there'd be no nattering droid breaking her concentration. She held Han tightly, ran her hands across his back, through his hair.

Han drew back from her, settled into his chair.

"Han, is something--" He smiled and put a finger to her mouth. Then he reached behind his neck and took one of Leia's hands in one of his own. He brought her hand forward.

Slowly, he peeled off her white glove. The deliberateness of his movements was maddening. And the lurking devil in his eyes assured Leia that Han knew exactly what he was doing. He lifted her nowbare hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, his breath and tongue tickling it softly. Then he gently nibbled on each finger, finally running his tongue over the pulse point of her wrist.

Leia had never thought of her hands as a particularly erogenous part of her body. She was finding that, in the hands of an expert, any part of her could be made to respond to pleasure. Her fingers, tingling with the slow, teasing movements of his mouth, itched with the need to touch him, to hold him, to feel him.

Han seemed in no particular hurry. He repeated his teasing actions with her other hand, then seemed content to just sit quietly holding her for a while.

Leia took advantage of the situation. Closing her eyes to heighten the tactile impressions, she ventured to acquaint herself with the feel of him. His face, his hair, his hard-muscled chest beneath the pilot's jacket. She had wanted the touch of him, the feel, so much. But it was not enough. It had been too long since Massassi, and there were too many deaths between them. And Han, I know his death was necessary, but did it have to be you who killed my brother?

Han stirred, that uncanny perspicacity that he displayed toward her moods and needs to the fore once again. He turned her face toward his. One hand raised her head to his until he could claim her lips. His other hand played soft, gentle games with her face, her neck, her hair, the closing of her white cold-suit.

Before she fully realized what he was about, Han had opened her suit to the waist. Still entrapping her lips with his, he shifted so that he could slip both hands under the confining material of the jump-suit and then he slid the quilted thermal material from her shoulders. His smooth, cool

hands encircled her. Leia shivered.

Han's lips moved to her neck, and she arched her back under the caressing pressure of his hands. He seemed to find particular pleasure in the hollow of her throat, in the pulse point beating rapidly at the base of her carotid artery. Then his mouth moved lower, raining a trail of soft butterfly kisses down the slope of her breasts, stopping only to pay homage to the heart-shaped mole high on the right one.

Leia shifted, fitted her body more securely on his lap, and leaned back against his supporting hands. A tremor shook her as his mouth fitted itself over her right breast. His tongue played enticing little games with her nipple, curving about and around it, teasing her, awakening her, making her hungry for more.

Han'd been right, damn him. The war had made her lose all perspective. It was life that was important, not death. Life, and the proud avowal of that life no matter what the odds. 'Never tell me the odds...'

And then all thought stopped as Han raised his head and reclaimed her lips. Leia's mouth opened without urging, and they kissed long and deeply. She was as eager to taste of him as he seemed to be to taste of her. And all the while his hands were running silkily up and down the curves of her upper body, now tracing his nails lightly along the line of her spine, now cupping her breasts, now gently rolling the hardened tips of her nipples between thumb and forefinger.

His lips traced the outline of her ears and his whisper stirred the straying tendrils of her hair. "Leia, I--"

He paused and shook his head as though to clear it. Leia became aware of the low, steady thrum of a tell-tale on the console.

"What the--" Han twisted to look at the readout panel. " θ h, shit. Not now! Damn, it's just not fair." His hands tightened around her.

Leia drew away from him. "Han, what--"

He kissed her on the tip of her nose. "Button up, love. We'll have to finish this later." He shifted her off his lap, his hands lingering on the bare skin of her waist, her midriff, as though reluctant to leave. He pulled the quilted thermalwear together and thumbed closed the fastening to Leia's cold-suit. "Now, just sit, Leia."

Anger replaced the warmth Han's skilled love-making had engendered in her. She glared daggers at him. He shrugged, raised both hands in protest. "Hey, Princess, it's not my fault. Don't go fuming off at me."

"Han, if you don't explain--" The voice was calm and rational, remarkably so, considering that sparks were still flying from her eyes. An underlying hint of command was clearly evident.

Han turned back to the console and opened the intercom. "Chewie, to the cock-pit, on the double."

He either ignored, or did not hear, Leia's words.

"Doirghlierfhleriasgh?"

"Cut the wise-cracks, Chewie. And get your mangy carcass up here on the double." He clicked off the intercom and turned to Leia. He pointed to the sensor panel. The thrumming noise Leia had noted earlier was coming from one of its components. "Someone's on our tail. And this is such a damnall deserted chunk of space I don't think it's an accident."

"Imperials?"

"I don't know. It's a small ship--barely a one-man yacht from the weight and size specs--but it's over-armed for its size and has <u>damn</u> heavy shielding. So I *don't* think it's just a pleasure craft. Whether it's after <u>us</u> or not is another story."

"Can you lose it?" Anger was forgotten in the face of this new threat.

Han shook his head. "I don't know. Without the hyperdrive... Don't worry, we'll get out of this." He paused thoughtfully. "The trouble is, he may have gotten a good fix on where we're going. We've been keeping a fairly steady course since leaving Anoat." He flashed her a crooked smile. "That's what I get for letting myself get distracted. Next time I'll know better."

Leia smiled silkily. "And just what makes you think--"

There was a pounding on the door. "Fooiologhriorgh."

Han leaned over and gave Leia a quick kiss on the cheek. Then he turned back to his console. He depressed a button and the door slid open. Chewbacca clumped into the cockpit. He stood there a moment, head cocked to one side. He wrinkled his black nose. "Hiorthgyliorf?"

"Don't get gross, fuzz-ball," Han snapped angrily.

Leia stuffed her sleeve into her mouth to keep from laughing. Han was blushing again. That surely had to be some sort of record. Twice in one day. And no one'd believe me if I told them.

Chewbacca gave an open-mouthed grin and lowered himself into his seat. Without removing his eyes from the star-field in front of him, Han said, "And no wise-cracks from you, back there."

"I wouldn't think of it," Leia said, keeping a straight face with difficulty.

Han's snort and the slope of his shoulders were eloquent of his disbelief. "Right. And I'm the long-lost Prince of the Sith."

Leia smiled at the time-worn phrase and settled back into her seat. Han was right. She $\underline{\text{had}}$ been about to add her two credits' worth. She watched in fascination as Han's fingers danced skillfully over the instrument panel. He played the Falcon as

skillfully as...as skillfully as he played me. And that's it, isn't it? That's why we, why the Alliance never really caught him the way we did Luke. He loves a flighty lady. She ran her hands almost lovingly along the worn arm of her seat. Her rival. How could she... Share him with me, Ladybird? At least for a bit?

Her mood ended as Han began his evasive tactics. She closed her eyes against the dizzying effect of the star-field swirling in front of the ship as Han made the Falcon engage in a series of spiraling loops.

"Do you really think these dramatics are necessary? I told you before, you don't have to do this to impress me."

"I'm not. I want to see if--ah. He's not following. Must have been a false alarm." He pointed to the blip moving steadily across the screen. Then he frowned and raised the magnification. "There's something familiar about the configuration of that ship." He turned to Chewbacca doubtfully, but the Wookiee only shook his head and shrugged.

Han reached out to the ship's log and fed the statistics from the sensor screen into it. Within minutes, an answer appeared on the read-out panel. Han's frown deepened. "I don't like this. My logs show no personal contact with a ship matching that design, and yet I definitely recognize it. So it's gotta be someone I'd know on sight."

"Another smuggler?" Leia asked.

Han shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't get the right feel for that."

"Are we in trouble?"

Han and the Wookiee exchanged glances, then both looked back at the princess. "Are we in trouble?" Han repeated disbelievingly.

"Are we in more trouble?" Leia amended.

Han closed his eyes and shook his head. He rubbed his temples wearily. "No, Leia, we're not in any more trouble than usual. We have the Imperials, Jabba the Hut, and Morga alone knows who else on our trail, we have a ship that can't jump into hyperspace, we just lost a damn near secured base to Darth Vader, we're heading toward a--a 'friend' I haven't seen in so many years there may not be a welcome for us, we can't squib a message to Luke or the General at the rendezvous point to let 'em know where we're heading for 'cause that might alert Vader, we--"

Leia leaned over and, in front of the Wookiee's interested eyes, gave Han a light kiss on the temple. "In other words, it's business as usual."

Han reached up, caressed her cheek. "Yeah, guess you <u>could</u> say that. Look, why don't you go rest. It's been a rough trip, and it's not over yet."

"How far to Bespin?"

Han glanced over at Chewbacca as though for

confirmation of his statistics. "We'll be using sublight and some boosting from the FTL, but without hyperdrive, it's a good ten day trip."

Leia was startled. From the figures she'd seen on the log print-out, she knew the trip could have been done in one-tenth that time with hyperdrive. "But with FTL--"

Han shook his head. "The FTL only puts us .5 past light speed. And even though that's the fastest thing in space, it don't do us a \underline{bit} of good if we can't cut through hyperspace." He smiled at Leia's look of utter frustration. "Hey, it could be worse, little one."

"Could be? I thought it was worse. You just gave a very thorough run-down of what we're facing."

Han shrugged. "We could be on sublight only. Then it'd take <u>years</u> to reach the closest star-system." He turned to look at her. "And while the idea of drifting through space with you for years on end may be quite romantic--"

Leia put her hand across his mouth. "I know. Neither of us can afford it. Not now. The Alliance--"

"And Jabba the Hut," Han interjected.

"And Jabba the Hut," Leia added, "just won't allow it." She rose from her seat. "I think I will take you up on that offer to get some rest." She touched his shoulder briefly, lovingly, as she rose. His hand covered hers momentarily before returning to the controls. Leia looked down at his tousled hair, then turned away quickly. "Chewbacca," she said, "you take care of things up here, okay? Han gets --'distracted' too easily."

Chewbacca grinned at her. "Cerialiogetoler."

Han took his eyes away from his instrument board. "Not with you out of here, I don't, Leiamy-sweet."

Leia smiled and left the cockpit, almost letting him have the last word. At the threshold she turned. "Don't forget to turn Threepio back on," she reminded them, smiling at the look of distaste Han directed toward the silent, darkened droid.

She waited until the door slid shut behind her, then leaned against the cool metal wall. Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, She felt like screaming, like pounding on a wall, like--she sighed. She felt like anything but the calm, cool Leia Organa who had led the Alliance forces for the past three years. And losing control would not help restore that person to her. Not now. Not this time.

She walked slowly to the main sleeping cabin of the Falcon. Her thoughts had seldom been so unproductive. Why the <u>hell</u> does it always have to be so damn hard?

Leia stepped from the sonic shower. It had been invigorating after the hectic pace of the last two--had it indeed been only two days since the Imperial attack on Hoth? She picked a brush up from the set-in dresser and stroked it through her long hair as she calculated the time elements. Yes, only two days. And she'd seen more than enough adventure to last any two people for a much longer time. At least there're no asteroid fields between here and Bespin...

Leia did not turn around when the door to the cabin slid open. Strong, slender fingers took the brush from her hand, slid it slowly and sensously through her long tangled tresses.

"I didn't know you were programmed for hair-dressing duties, Threepio," she said calmly, fastening the flimsy robe she'd found in Han's cabin a bit more securely about her.

There was a sharp tug on her hair. "Very funny, Princess," Han said in his usual cynical tones. Then she felt his breath on her ear and his voice dropped to a near whisper that did very strange things to her backbone--not to mention her legs. "I'll bet you didn't know I was programmed for this, either."

He twined his hands in the masses of her gleaming, heavy hair and bent her head back. Leaning over, he carefully fitted his mouth over hers. The kiss drained her of all desire to resist. To give herself wholly to sheer physical pleasure, just once. To lose sight of the Alliance, of the responsibilities she had carried since she was eighteen, first as senator, then as Alliance leader. Han was right, damn him, she had forgotten herself, her own needs.

With a sigh that was almost a sob, Leia twisted in Han's arms until she was facing him. Then she abandoned herself to the kiss with as much fervor as he. When they both paused for breath, Han smiled down at her and touched one finger to the tip of her nose.

"Hello, Just-Leia."

"Hello, Just-Han."

Han laughed. Despite the narrow confines of the sleeping cabin, he picked Leia up and whirled about with her in his arms. The sudden, silly movement removed any final doubts she might have had. Leia laughed freely, something she had not done since before the battle over the Death Star.

Finally breathless, Han dropped onto the bunk. He still cradled Leia in his arms. He set her down gently next to him. He framed her face in his hands, a question in the depths of his eyes. Leia answered not by words, but by reaching out to the fastenings on his muslin shirt. This time it was she whose eyes imprisoned his as she slowly undid the shirt. She smiled then, and leaning over, she slipped it off his shoulders. He cooperated fully with her, letting her draw it off first one, then the other arm.

Shirt disposed of, Leia attacked more important problems. She traced one fingernail down the old blaster scar on Han's right shoulder to his nipple. Using just her nail, she stroked the tender areola lightly. Han drew in his breath sharply.

Then he closed his eyes and began to arch under her ministrations. Leia smiled and bent to trace the scar with her tongue while her hands continued their teasing, light attentions to his body. Play me like the instrument panel of your ship, will you, Captain Han Know-It-All-About-Women Solo? As I said, you don't know everything yet, do you?

Han was leaning his body back on his arms. With a wicked grin, Leia knocked his arms out from under him so that he fell heavily backward onto the bed. He opened his eyes in seemingly shocked surprise, but before he could say anything, Leia was kissing him deeply, aggressively, in very evident enjoyment.

He chuckled faintly. As his arms came up behind her, Leia realized she'd made a tactical error. Han rolled over, pinned her beneath him. His fingers undid the single knot on the belt of her robe. Pushing the thin material aside, he ran his fingers along the curves of her body, skimming the flesh so lightly that she felt only the faintest whisper of a touch. Her skin came alive beneath his fingers. She wanted him, needed him.

He curved his mouth over her breast. Leia gave a small gasp of pleasure as he tongued the nipple, then began a steady sucking. One hand teased her other nipple, and the other hand began a slow, sensuous exploration of her body. And sweet Mother Morga, how that body responded to his love-making! Leia stretched, cat-like, beneath his hands, and he knew the shadows and the crevices of her as no one had known them before.

Breathing heavily, Leia pushed him away. He raised a brow quizzically, but drew back, seemingly content to follow her lead at this point. She needed time to think, to calm herself a bit or bring him to the same peak of excitement that she was trembling on.

Her hands went to the waist of his jeans. She undid the fastening and pushed the pants down over his hips. She shifted out from under him, rolled him over on his back, and applied herself to the interesting proposition of divesting him of the sole item of clothing he still wore.

Panting a little from her exertions, she glanced up at him through the veil of her hair. "No boots?" she asked with a smile.

 $\mbox{\sc He}$ grinned wickedly. "An old Corellian proverb."

"Be prepared?"

His grin widened appreciatively. "No, though that one's good, too. I was thinking of 'When in doubt, strip'."

She groaned. Then she slapped him on the thigh. Obligingly, he kicked off his jeans. He held out his arms and she came to him willingly. They lay close, and she savored the warmth of him, the strength. Her body came alive under the artistry of his hands, his lips, his tongue, and she saw with pleasure that she could arouse in him comparable sensations.

She was aflame, atremble, and still he controlled himself, made no move to take her. She groaned as his hand moved down to caress her inner thigh, then moved slowly upward to tantalize her. She rolled over on top of him. Gripping his hair tightly in both hands, she gave his head a little shake.

"There are $\underline{\mathsf{names}}$ for men like you, Solo. And none of them are repeatable in mixed company."

He didn't respond, but simply pulled her head down to his so that he could taste deeply of her once more. Her hair fell forward to pool around him and he buried his hands in it.

And then the time for words, for teasing half-promises, was over, and he entered her. They met in the full heat of mutual passion, and as he exploded within her, the fury of her own response shook her slender body. She shuddered as wave after wave of blinding white flame hit her senses, and she cried out inchoately as it peaked to a fiery crescendo.

They collapsed into each other's arms, triumphantly weary, spent, yet alive as they'd not been in too long a time. Alive. Still alive. And new life to come after, no matter what...

Han brushed a strand of hair back from her sweat-slicked face and dropped a lazy kiss on her forehead.

"Hello, Just-Leia," he smiled.

"Hello, Han," she answered as she snuggled deeper into his arms, head comfortably cradled on his chest. Feeling warm, safe--loved--she allowed her eyes to close and fell quickly to sleep.

The ten days passed slowly, almost dreamily, with no more sudden alarms, false or otherwise, to disturb the steady tempo of the hours. The evenings of intimacy between Leia and Han deepened, and, even without their realization, spread to the daytime hours, also. They shared the same watch, prepared their meals together, arranged their shipboard tasks so they fell simultaneously, spent their off-duty hours with one another.

At one point, Leia apologized to Chewbacca for leaving him so much to the company of Threepio. The Wookiee simply looked at her wisely out of guileless blue eyes and made a short comment that Han blushingly refused to translate.

And while a sharing of bodies need not always lead to a sharing of minds, a sharing of lives often may. The fears and terrors Leia'd not dared tell anyone, not since her fiance's death shortly before her own imprisonment aboard the Death Star, came spilling out. And rather than meet them with mocking, self-aggrandizing comments, Han countered with his own confessions of the personal tragedy that had turned an idealistic young guardsman named Rookhan Parnell into a cynical smuggler who called himself Han Solo.

"And, yeah, I guess I always knew Lando was a

rascal, but damn, he was there when I needed him, when none of my 'law-abiding' friends or--or 'relatives' even wanted to know me." Han leaned wearily back against the banquette in the Falcon's common room.

Leia reached a comforting hand out across the game table to the Corellian. "Will it hurt that much, to see him again?"

He smiled wryly, reached down to take her hand. "No, Leia. That part of me's dead and gone. Even if--if Rookhan did want to return to life, I don't think I'd know how to bring him back." He raised her hand to his mouth. "'Sides, I got enough to worry about right now with you." He kissed her palm.

Leia forced down the pleasure his slightest touch caused. No ties, no entanglements. You're the one who laid the ground rules, Leia. Don't go trying to change them now, just because you find you can't live with them. "And with Jabba the Hut," she added.

Han met her eyes steadily. "And with Jabba the Hut."

"It's my fault, isn't it, Han? You could have paid off the bounty and been free of the Hut if I hand't talked you into helping us raid Cinncinnatus."

Han gave her hand a gentle squeeze, pressed another kiss to her palm. "Leia-my-own, if it hadn't been Cinncinnatus, it'd have been something else. Jabba and I were on the outs before I met Luke and old Ben. The Hut was just bidin' his time, waiting for something to hit. And with that damn bitch Antibe eggin' him on..."

"Do you have enough credits to get the hunt lifted?"

"If the Hut's gotten over his snit at my blastin' off from Cinncinnatus Port without payin' him, yes." He grinned. "Look, Princess, I may have pulled your cakes out of the fire more than once, but better believe I got paid for most of those 'special missions' I took on."

She pulled her hand away and smiled wryly. "I know. You should have heard Dodonna complaining about what your 'excursions' were doing to the Alliance treasury."

Han shrugged. "I could always have let Vader reclaim the whole thing for the Empire."

Leia stood and stretched. Then she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "No, you couldn't. Rookhan wouldn't have let you."

"Why, you--" He reached for her, but she danced out of the way. "Come over here."

"So you can hit me? Don't be stupid."

His smile was wide, crooked, and very, very sensual. "Actually, it wasn't hitting I had in mind."

Her smile matched his. "Is that all you ever

think about?"

Han raised innocent eyes to the overhead beams of the ${\it Falcon}$. "Not at all. I think about spaceships, too."

She laughed and came into his arms. For a small, breathless eternity they explored once again the universe of each other's mouth, face, skin, and Leia marveled that it seemed as fresh and compelling as the first time.

The intercom buzzed with static. Cursing roundly, Han pushed Leia off his lap. Rising, he stormed over to the comset. "What is it, Chewie? And it better be damn good."

"Sealirbralghspirior."

Han's face tightened. "Okay. We'll be right there." Han shut off the intercom and turned to Leia once more. He cupped her face with his hands. "We're within planet-fall of Bespin, Leia. Time to let the real world back in."

He bent to her and kissed her hungrily. Then he drew her into his arms and held her tightly, staving off that real world for yet another minute or so. He took a deep breath, started to speak. "Leia, I--"

She pulled back and put a hand over his mouth. "Shh. I know. I've known for the past three years." Clenching her hands tightly in the material of his jacket, she raised herself to meet his kiss one last time. "But we have promises to keep, my love. Promises to keep." Her words were whispered softly against his mouth, but he heard and understood. His arms tightened around her even more, loving bonds that only she could break.

She pulled away slowly, resolutely. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Let's go meet your friend."



Slow Boat to Bespin 2

Barbara Wenk

"You do have your moments," Leia said as the *Millennium Falcon* shot out of the Imperial cruiser's garbage and headed on its new course. "Not many of them, but you do have them." She kissed Han's cheek before sliding back to her seat.

Han flashed a grin at her. "I know, Your Wor--"

She glared at him.

His grin widened. "I know, I do, I really do, don't I?" Leia reluctantly smiled back, unable to resist his contagious delight in his own cleverness.

There was a roar from the intercom. Han turned back to it. "Chewie? No, that's okay. Just stay down there and see if you can do anything about that damn drive."

"Bralrhigasgn--"

"Listen, chum," said Han, his voice heavy with meaningful menace. "I said stay out of here 'n--"

There was a hooting growl from Chewbacca.

"Now listen here, Chewie--" Han was inter-

rupted by a few sharp barks from Chewbacca, followed by a crashing noise and then silence. "Wish he'd stop throwing things at the speakers," Han muttered.

Leia eyed him suspiciously. Han smiled guilelessly back. Then he cast a disgusted glance at the silent form of C-3PO, flipped a couple of switches on the instrument panels, punched a button, and swivelled around to face Leia.

"Relax, sweetheart, it's gonna be a long ride."

"At sublight speed, I should think so," she responded. "How long is long?"

Han shrugged. "Couple days, maybe."

She could almost hear his follow-up thought. If nothing else goes wrong. It only echoed her own fears. She shook her head. "I suppose that means a week, at least. Well, I only hope this flying junkheap of yours holds together." With a sigh, she reached out to 3PO's neck.

"Hey, don't do that." Han caught her wrist. "What d'ya want to turn on that yellow squawk-box for, Your Worship? A chaperone?"

She tried to wrench free. "Stop it."

"Can't you say anything else?" said Han disgustedly. "There's just one way to shut you up, isn't there?" With that, he grabbed her waist and hauled her onto his lap. Ignoring her vigorous protests, he began kissing her with skill and passion.

This time, however, she had no intention of weakly melting into his practiced embrace. She relaxed only until he loosened his prisoning grip on her arms, then punched him as hard as she could on his ribs. Considering her cramped position and their padding of clothes, it wasn't much of a blow, but Han did push her back, wounded surprise on his face.

"All right, Your Untouchableness. Maybe I was wrong." He shoved her off his lap, nearly sending her to the floor. "Well, the hell with it. You don't even hit good."

Leia's eyes lit with anger. "Oh, is that so?" She let herself fall back to his lap with a thud. "Well, Captain--" She took his head in her hands, leaned forward against his chest, and fitted her mouth carefully to his. This time, hotshot, you're the one in for a surprise, damn you. Calling up every bit of skill she'd ever learned or imagined, she didn't release him from the kiss until they were both in danger of passing out from lack of oxygen.

As she sat back, breathing heavily, she noted with satisfaction the glazed look of Han's eyes. "As I said before, you don't know everything about women, Captain Solo."

"Yeah, Princess," he said, the stunned expression changing to one of his most attractive smiles. "Yeah, maybe you're right at that."

Leia wasn't sure which of them initiated the next embrace. After five minutes, it didn't matter. Neither said another word for a considerable time, concentrating on amorous exploration of each other's mouths.

Then Han's fingers caressed her throat and strayed down to the closing of her jumpsuit. Her lips never leaving his, Leia arched her body to let him slide his hand down the fastening to her waist, breaking the seal and opening the jumpsuit. His hand moved to her breast.

Leia was rudely jolted from her absortion with Han's lips as he once again pushed her back. She opened her eyes. There was a peculiar expression of bafflement on Han's face. She glanced down at the hand he had cupped over her breast.

"Aw, now, Leia--" He tugged unhappily at the fabric of her undergarment. $\label{eq:condition}$

"But Han," she protested, touching the neck of her tight-fitting, fire-red thermal underwear, "it was fifty below on Hoth!"

"Yeah, but--"

"I thought you were the galaxy's greatest smuggler, hotshot." Leia deliberately ran a gloved finger very lightly over Han's lips, down his neck.
"If you can't even get past thermals, I'm not sure
I want you running cargo for us."

"Listen, lady, there ain't a blockade in this galaxy I can't get by." There was an authentic ring of hurt pride in Han's voice.

Leia raised her eyebrows skeptically. "Prove

The remainder of the sentence was muffled as Han's mouth covered hers. In another minute, he demonstrated that he was as efficient in getting past long underwear as he was in running an Imperial barricade.

Curving to his caresses, Leia set her own hands to the task of opening Han's loose shirt. This done, she slipped her hand under the shirt, indulging her desire to fondle him in turn.

"Leia?" Han's voice was soft, exciting, on her ear. "I don't know quite how to say this--but would'ja mind taking off your gloves first?"

Flushing, Leia pulled back, sitting straight and stiff on his lap. She yanked her gloves off and stuffed them into her pocket. "Satisfied?"

"Not yet," Han said, his voice as seductive as his hands. "Come back here."

A timeless period followed when nothing mattered but his arms around her and his hands and lips on her mouth and skin. For one shining span of passion, she could forget danger, responsibility and grief, willingly abandoning herself to the feelings Han was so proficiently arousing, and responding to him in kind.

His lips slid along her throat, shifted to her ear. "Leia," he breathed. "Leia, I--" $\,$

There was a loud growl and a slam on the cockpit door. Startled, the mood broken, Leia leaped up and Han jumped, eliciting crys of "ouch!" from both and a string of expletives from Han as they banged into various portions of the cramped cockpit.

"Oh--" Leia said, hastily pulling down her thermal undershirt and refastening her jumpsuit.

"Yeah," said Han, a look of utter frustration on his face. "Goddamn it, Chewie, what the hell do you want now?"

Another growl and snarl. "No, I'll be right down there," said Han, stuffing his shirt back into the waistband of his jeans. There was a short bark from Chewbacca, to which Han yelled back, "What the hell d'ya think? Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'! Nothing worse than a smart-aleck Wookiee."

Leia giggled, more as a release from tension than anything else. "Han--"

He whirled around, holding up his hand. "I don't want to hear it." $\label{eq:holding}$

"But Han, I--"

But he had hit a button on the control panel and was out the door.

"--really think you should tuck in the back of your shirt," Leia finished. She shook her head, smiling ruefully.

Then she slowly and carefully sat down in the pilot's chair. She tucked a strand of hair back into her braid, straightened her jumpsuit, and took a deep breath. She stared out at the brilliant stars. Calm, that was what she needed to be. Calm and controlled. It was a long way to Bespin.

"Oh, shit!" she said, slamming her hands down on the instrument panel.

Gods, but it felt good to get out of that white jumpsuit! Free of jumpsuit and boots, Leia stretched luxuriously. Glancing again at the door, she yanked off the long-sleeved thermal undershirt. Clad only in the snug, ankle-length thermal underpants, she sat on the edge of the narrow bunk and lifted her hands to her braided hair.

"Aw, c'mon, Your Worship." Han's voice was close. "Admit it, you were expecting me."

"No." She kept her gaze fixed on the far wall. $\dot{}$



The mattress sagged a bit as Han sat down beside her. His finger traced lightly but deliberately down her spine. "Then why'd you leave the door unlocked?" he asked softly.

He put his hands on her shoulders, gently turning her to face him. She was not particularly surprised to see that the only thing he had on was his jeans. His fingers tightened on her bare shoulders. Leia set her hands flat on his chest and searched his face, finding in it no trace of his usual mockery.

"Han, I don't know--"

"'s all right, Princess. I do." With that, he bent and kissed her.

There was no urgency to the caress, only warming skill and care. He didn't try to pull her close, apparently content to convey sensation through the lips alone. His hands never even left her shoulders.

When they broke the kiss, Leia inhaled sharply, shaking her head. "Han, I-- This is nothing but--but passion, Han. It's not--"

"You got something against it, Princess?" Han's voice and hands were tender but insistent. "Y'know, you look better in red long-johns than anyone I've ever seen."

"And you've seen a lot, I suppose?"

"That's right," Han said amiably. His voice dropped to a seductive whisper. "Leia--"

"Yes?" Her own voice had softened.

"There's one thing I've wanted from you for a long time, you know." He leaned forward.

"And what's that?" Leia found that she too was whispering. If she had just laid herself open to a sardonic wisecrack, she'd kill him.

"Leia." Han's mouth nearly touched hers.
"Your hair. Let your hair down, Leia. Please?"
The last word was almost lost as their lips met.

His hands slid from her shoulders, moving lovingly down until they rested on the curve of her waist. Letting her lips cling to Han's, Leia put her hands to the thick braid of her hair. Unpinning it while kissing was awkward, but she managed, pulling and shaking the heavy mass of hair free of its confining braid. It fell around her to her hips, soft against her back.

Han pulled away to look at her with admiraation. "Oh, yeah."

Leia ducked her head, suddenly, idiotically, shy. "I had to take it down anyway."

"Sure," Han said, running a hand down her hair.

"It needs to be brushed out," she said, feeling breathless. "In--in stories, women are always unbinding their hair and it's like a cloud of silk.

But when you've had it braided for--"

"Looks damn fine to me," Han said warmly. He twined his hands in her hair. "Damn fine. You should let it down more often."

"It's hard to--" She stopped as Han tilted her head back and began kissing her neck, the tip of his tongue tracing the vein of her throat. She shivered, put her hands on his hard-muscled chest again. "Hard to--to run a revolution with your hair hanging around your hips and getting--"

Han raised his head until his mouth touched her ear. "Gonna make you forget about that damn rebellion for one night, Princess."

Even if only for an hour, to forget the fighting and dying-- Leia shivered again, then suddenly wrapped her arms around Han, pressing her breasts to the warmth of his chest, her cheek against his shoulder. "I can't. I can never--"

The next moment, Han had both of them flat on the bunk. "Now listen, an' listen good, 'cause I'm only gonna say this once." His expression as he looked at her held compassion as well as desire. "There's a time and a place for everything." His hand went to the waistband of her underslacks. "And this--" he began easing the garment over her hips, "ain't the time for--"

Leia laced her fingers behind his head and pulled him close to kiss him. She shifted to let him slide her underslacks down further. "If you think this means I love you," she said against his mouth, "you're wrong. It's only--"

"I know, I know," he said. He rolled until she lay half over him. Leia took advantage of this to kick her underslacks off. As Han's nails went carefully over the lines and curves of her back, she once more set her mouth over his. And now she was able to reach the fastening of his jeans. There was no reason he should have all the fun of exploration.

"The bunk's too narrow," she said, pausing. "We're going to fall out."

"Like hell," Han told her. "Just keep going. $I^{\prime}m$ going to do the worrying and take care of the details tonight."

The familiar mocking grin was on his face, but his hazel eyes still held that peculiar look of sympathetic understanding. Leia suddenly found herself blushing hotly, overcome by a chaotic mixture of emotions, a confusion she relieved by biting Han's shoulder. That led to a wrestling match, and they almost \emph{did} fall out of the bunk.

After that brief but interesting interlude, Leia returned to her task of removing Han's jeans.

Not being the expert in the field of clothing removal under awkward circumstances that Han obviously was, it took Leia several minutes to separate Han and jeans. Clothing finally disposed of, she discovered that Han was also a master of the slow, sensual tease.

Forget the revolution? After half an hour of this it was a wonder she could remember her own name. Just once, to have total pleasure, without thought or interruption--

"Han? Han!"

"'n I always thought ${\it I}$ talked too much," he said. "Princess Leia Worshipful Organa, don't you ever shut up?"

"Han, where's 3PO?"

He released her and sat up. "What the hell kind of question is that at a time like this? Sometimes, Princess, you--"

Leia put her hand on his thigh. "I'm serious, Han. Where?"

"Still turned off 'n up in the cockpit. Why?" The comprehension gleamed in his eyes, and he grinned. "Don't worry, that 'droid ain't about to come nattering in to interrupt this time."

Leia reached up to him, and he slid back down into her arms. "Chewie isn't going to suddenly bang on the door, is he?" she asked.

"Not if he wants to keep his fur on, he won't" Han assured her, nuzzling her ear.

"And Han--"

He took a handful of her hair and held it over her mouth. "Are you going to stop arguing?"

She nodded meekly. Han brushed her hair back and shifted until they lay facing each other, pressed closely together. Before he began on anything else, Leia lifted her head from his arm and tugged gently on his hair. When he obligingly tilted his head, she set her mouth to his ear, outlining it with her tongue and lips.

"Han," she breathed, as his hand began moving down her body. "Han, how long until we--"

Han groaned, grabbed her head in his hands, and shook it. "Damn it, woman, don't you ever stop talking?"

"--get to Bespin?" Leia continued with as much dignity as possible. $% \begin{center} \begin{ce$

"Not long enough, at this rate," Han muttered.

The sight of his face was too much for Leia. Giggling, she ducked her face into the curve of his shoulder.

"I'm glad you think it's so funny, Your Highnessness," Han said. "Now c'mon, Leia, cut that out."

She turned her head just enough to say, "Make me," before a fresh spasm of laughter shook her.

"I'm tryin' to, believe me, I'm tryin'," Han said.

At the indignation in his voice, Leia propped

herself on her elbow, leaning to let her hair fall over him. "Very," she agreed.

"Jokes like this I really need," Han said, with a look of incredible long-suffering. He added threateningly, "I'm very what, Your Highness?"

"Very good," Leia said hastily. She kissed the thin scar on his chin. "Very."

Han gave her the slow, wicked grin that she'd both loved and hated since she'd first met him. "Good?" He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head down until their noses touched. "Princess, you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Leia smiled sweetly and nipped his nose. That was the last moment of the night that could even remotely be called rational.

If all the gods were kind, they would reach Bespin tomorrow. And I'm sure Han will be able to con this Lando 'friend' of his into fixing the hyperdrive. And we'll be to the rendezvous point in no time. Leia stared into the darkness. Safeand then Han would be gone. This was the last night she would spend lying on his chest, his arms holding her securely even in sleep.

Leia's arms tightened on Han as she struggled with an overwhelming sense of jealous possession.

No, he's mine. I won't let him go, damn him! With cold clarity, her own words came back to haunt her. He must choose his own path...no one can choose it for him. No one...

"Oh, Han," she said softly.

She had forgotten his outlaw's suspicion and superb senses. He was awake immediately, his muscles tense. His hand touched her hair, and he relaxed under her. "Leia."

"Is that a question or a comment?" she asked. Folding her hands on his chest, she propped her chin on her fingers and tried to see through the dark to his face.

"You really think I'm gonna answer a question like that, Princess?" There was amusement under the tone of injured innocence.

Leia shook her head slowly, letting her hair slide over them. "No. I'd never expect you to answer a loaded question--Solo."

There was silence for a minute. Then Han said softly, "So you'd never ask them--Princess?"

"That's right," said Leia sharply. Then she put her arms around him again, pressing her face against his neck.

"Leia." Han began stroking her hair. "I got Jabba the Hut on my tail, you know."

"And I have a revolution to run," she whispered.

"Yeah."

Silence, darkness, and the warmth of Han against her, his hand stroking the length of her long hair. But no commitments. Not from me, not from him. It was better--easier--that way. It had to be.

His hand on her hair stopped. "Leia--" Then he paused.

"Yes, Han?" she said after a moment.

"Leia, there's something--" Han sounded almost as if he were forcing the words past his lips. "Something I want to tell you, before--"

"Before you leave? You don't have to tell me anything." Nothing they said would make it easier, only more difficult.

"Yes, I do." He wound a hand in her hair, tilted her head. His lips brushed her cheek, then just touched her lips. "Leia, I--"

In desperation, Leia stopped his mouth with hers, kissing him fiercely. Her arms held him as tightly as chains. "I know," she said against his mouth as they paused between kiss and kiss. Her breath caught on a half-sob. "I know."



My Love Has Wings

Annette Hall

It hasn't been easy. I tend to think of self first -- because what happened touched me so deeply, because Jim has never been willing...been able ...to speak of it, and because there is no one else I could or would share it with. There are a host of reasons. It is also because I am who and what I am. But he is mine, and finally, unavoidably, I must think of him.

What did Jim give that day? What made his gift such an incredible...impossible thing? I will never have an answer, only forever and always a question. I live with it because if I could not, I would lose him. I would have to give him up, and he is too important to me. I record this now; perhaps when I am old, when I am alone, I will reach out for that day and realize that its beginnings and end have finally faded. I do not want it to be lost; here on this tape it will live for me, and if not for me, for someone yet to come. But now it still lives in my mind as close and as real to me as these cold, gray walls that enclose my room...my home.

Stardate 8417.04 was one of those quiet duty days. We had been starcharting, doing medical checkups on personnel on remote outposts, and making milkruns for over a month. But for me it had been a joy-filled time, a day like so many of the days that had gone before. He was there -- Captain James T. Kirk...James Kirk...Jim...mine. And for once there was no danger to him, except for his firm belief that he would soon die of boredom. It had taken so long for me to believe that this man could find the things he needed in me, but I had finally learned to trust. He had lost none of the

charm or appeal that had eased his way through life; he had not given way to my fears, and I had found a bedrock faith in his commitment to me. Our unspoken agreement not to flaunt our love was no longer a trial to me. It was, for many reasons, a necessary thing, and with my trust I was secure in my self and thus I was secure in him.

Then the subspace call came in. It sounded so simple at first, I was not even really paying attention. It \underline{is} hard to understand the amount of trivial information that passes through the communications system of a starship; but we are not just the protectors of Federation territory and the explorers of interstellar space, we are also the mail carrier, the reminder of home, and the visitor bringing news to brighten up the dullness of colony life. When the message came in, over audio as Jim had ordered, "The Mithyana want to go home," I might not have even looked up -- except for the silence.

They must have known. Some nameless little bureaucrat buried at Headquarters must have known more about my love than I did. When I glanced at Jim, wondering at the unexpected lack of response, I knew that I was not the only surprised person on the bridge. He had gone absolutely livid, frightening in his paleness; and McCoy had immediately gone to his side. I could sense the growing unease of the rest of the bridge crew. Jim has always known how much his (at least outward) serenity created security for everyone else, but he has never been able to understand how much in tune we are with his moods, how we follow his responses as though they were part of our own personal realities.

He shook off McCoy's supporting hand and with five terse sentences effectively immobilized us all while he retreated to face his yesterdays.

"Mr. Spock, you have the con.

"Lieutenant Tammel, monitor $Mr.\ Spock's\ station.$

"Lieutenant Uhura, the balance of the message will be under scrambler code -- pipe it down to my cabin.

"Mr. Sulu, lay in a course for Sector 4, planet M483-b.

Then he was gone, and I had a job to do. In the ten days it took us to reach our destination, traveling at warp 6, he never returned to me. He rearranged all duty schedules so as never to work my shift. McCoy's instructions from headquarters had been short and unequivocal, "Captain Kirk is released from all medical authority until the Enterprise completes its mission." He was cut off from everyone.

I had waited that first night for Jim to come to me -- I have never forgotten that he must have the outward sense of freedom, just as he has always been aware that I must have the inward sense of belonging. We can both live without our needs -- and have done so; but as he gives to me so do I willingly give to him. He met me at the door to my quarters, all defenses in play. No, it was more than that. Not defenses at all; it was a complete, total shutout. He stood there, more unknown to me than the day I met him, and tersely gave me my orders.

"I can't...won't explain. Not now...not ever. I won't be with you again until it's over; and then it will be your decision as to what happens between us." With no additional warmth in that lifeless voice, he added, "I still love you," and was gone.

We all knew where Jim was spending his free time -- in the gym, alone, always under null gravity; but I could not understand why. The only information available about Mithyana in our computer banks was location and geographical tapes. There was nothing to explain what was going on and what "going home" meant to the Mithyana -- or to Jim.

Finally we were in orbit around Mithyana, and Jim was ready to beam down. Only four of us were allowed to go with him. From the way he called our names one could not tell -- I could not tell -- that any of us was or had been special to him. "Mr. Spock, Lt. Uhura, Lt. Tammel, Dr. McCoy" -- he read off the names as though we were all nothing more to him than the top of a duty roster. In my own misery I dismissed it as Jim's concern for his command image, not understanding that here was a place where I could not...would not...choose to be first.

We materialized a few meters from a small crowd of typical humanoids. They were an especially quiet group, with none of the minor rustlings or whisperings that are usual with any crowd. Their

total concentration was on waiting. Suddenly I caught my breath, and I, too, began to wait. Jim had disappeared, but I could not follow. Even Dr. McCoy, who normally would have been making acerbic comments, was caught in this unexplained waiting.

anananana

She drifted from behind the sky in a slow arc, flowing the impossible color-streaked wings in generous yet delicate strokes. She floated as in a dream, almost falling upward as she drifted down. She seemed sexless, yet unquestionably female. Suddenly the sky was split by a plummeting red streak — it was Jim. He had arranged his wings to hug his body; there was a minimal amount of friction—and he dropped faster and faster through the thickness until he fled past her, flaming to the ground. As she folded herself into a ball, only her iridescent wings were visible and she fell too faster and faster.

Only when Jim extended his wings did I realize that he had plunged head first toward disaster. He was racing to his death, yet the crowd didn't move — and I was held fast, watching him die. Had they actually called him there only to join them in a ritualistic flight to eternity? And had he known? Was his initial reaction an automatic plea to live?

He snapped -- pulling his wings up to the sun. His body danced skyward in the curve and, as he approached its apex, he folded and reached upward again, and again, and again, never losing the pulse of the silent alien music to which he danced. Fifty feet up he paused, body rigidly horizontal, wings upright, perpendicular to the earth, stretching to the sky -- no, not to the sky, to the angel woman who was still falling. Somehow she had slowed her descent without using her wings. Now she began to uncurl, bringing her body to the same pattern as Kirk's but moving her wings downward and slightly off angle to his. There in the sky they met, her back to his front. He held her safely in the sky, using his reality to free her spirit. Total support balanced by total trust. Typical roles in life, easily reversed, but she...they were going home, and he would speed them on their way.

They began a dance of yesterdays and tomorrows, swirling and touching in a chaste passion as though there was no possible ending, only an ever-building always dying creation born there in the skies.

They moved and moved again...and...I was with them. I lifted my wing to slowly enfold her and raised the other in triumphant anguish. I felt the strength of his arm, the silkiness of his wing wrapping me in a cocoon; and I swirled to give back that enfolding warmth, to lift us again though with my motion I broke free to hover above him. I was alone and lonely, yet we were held together by invisible patterns of flow and flux -- and I followed her up, seeing her glide above me, knowing she would lead me safely to the clouds. Spinning down...circling ...crossing and recrossing, we danced through time. We glided through space. We touched and worlds were born, bringing color to the blackness. We glided on a cometary pathway and stopped to pluck a fragile white flower. We walked hand in hand with the populations of universes and we stood alone in the void.



I took from her, sucking her soul, using her strength to birth my own...while she asked, demanded, stole...ripped at me until there was nothing of mine own. We fled through the skies, down the past and into the future, creating all -- destroying everything. There was blood and horror, yet that was the beginning of beauty and laughter. We spun a web to hold eternity and used it to cage a spirit. She...he...we...they...I danced.

armonoron

And I did not, still don't, know when it stopped. It was done, and we left them there to die together as a race, and they may be better for it. Jim beamed up by himself. It was days before he came on the bridge again. Perhaps that time was for us -- to let the memory fade. Perhaps it was for him; we had been a part of that incredible dance, but he had been the dancer. He was the one who had been chosen to see them on their way, a

stranger bringing his life to their dying.

It is not in our records. I, without asking, without considering, erased all the tricorder records and the computer tapes. I didn't even watch them to see what they carried. No mechanical device could have recorded that dance. Starfleet was duly upset over the missing records — the initial interest had come from Jim's obviously effective report on the qualities of the Mithyanan's dance, but his records had also been "lost". Computer backup failure is rarer; but with my record, systems breakdown was the only logical answer. I think...I feel that Jim knows, but we still cannot talk about any part of it.

Now, months later, I can look at him without the initial awe, without feeling the lesser...and for us it is still good. But sometimes, sometimes he will lift an arm or tilt his head a certain way, and I am again reminded that my love has wings.

NO CUARANTEES

A
ThousandWorlds
Chronicles
Story

Maggie Nowakowska

The woman looked away from the silvered night beyond the window casement and spoke to the darkness behind her. "She's too young. The risks are too great."

In the far corner of the room sheets rustled, their silkiness sighing with the man. "She will, by any of our calculations, be no more than twenty when Tarkin's machine is operational," he repeated wearily. "Lilan, we do what we can. If this comes to nothing... then we will be all too young for what follows."

There was nothing more she could say. The arguments were over now; the game was begun. She turned her face away from the charcoal interior and granted the moon sole audience to her bitter eyes.

"Lilan?"

"Yes."

"She's well trained, and you know what she's capable of. With the support of --"

"I did not raise my child to be a pawn, $\mbox{\it Bail!"}$

"Neither did I!"

Quick to anger, undauntable, the voice was his and her daughter's; she knew this, knew neither could be moved. She lay her head down on her arms on the casement and wept while the moonlight rained down on the shadows of her hair.

OM, 6099.24.10

The Empire had come, the Empire had stayed; those who endured its excesses remained alive. Violent revolution had transported even those of the old Republican Senate to a state of reaction past cynicism. All that could now shake that moribund body from the lethargy of its survival was the havoc an honest being could wreak with an unwise word, a hasty action. To do so meant death, and after nineteen years of Imperial rule, no one sat unaware of the shadows that watched them and waited.

So it was with morbid curiosity and the thrill of danger ringing warningly in their ears that the Senators gathered before midyear break. Bail Organa, a blunt whirlwind of perpetual emnity toward the Empire, Viceroy and Senator to the World Family of Alderaan, Clone War hero, friend of the lost Jedi, fool and madman as many called him, had been granted permission for a major address to the Senate. Attendance was high in the ancient chamber that had been the hub of galactic relations; every seat, every accommodation to racial comfort was filled; each desk comscreen was lit. Rumor had it that Organa was planning a vitriolic attack on the Senate President himself; rumor also whispered that Organa's days were numbered. The solons gathered, carefully hiding their anticipation, to see if, at last, the impassioned Alderaani would overstep Imperial bounds; to be able to say, one day in the

safety of their secluded planetary homes, that, yes, they had been there for Bail Organa's final address.

From his protected booth overseeing the Senate, Warlan Dahke of Bestine, body President and subject of the Alderaani's objections, kept an ear cocked to Organa's remarks while fantasizing elaborate means to eliminate the Alderaani irritant. Not that Dahke was given to romantic effort over the practical. It was simply an amusing way to pass the time. He knew full well what Organa's complaints would be this session; he had recommended the offending measures to the Emperor himself.

Let's see, he plotted lazily, we could arrange to have a catten fall in love with Organa -- yes, that would be interesting, Bail being a spirited lad with a wife (smart-mouthed bitch) busy running the planet -- just the timiest amount of poison on the cat's claws...No, I know; send him to Redants as Ambassador Select of Allocations; wouldn't the Queens love that? Hire an Orth assassin to disembowel...

Dahke raised an eyebrow at a particularly descriptive passage in which the Senator disclosed Dahke's involvement with the recent Imperial impoundings on Orca. Now, just how did he find out about that one? Damm rebel intelligence, the Bestinian cursed, flipping across the Senate with his monitor, noting which solons nodded in agreement, which didn't look surprised but should have, which busily conferred with aides at the announcement. There were a number of new ones in each category; too many. Dahke frowned, jealous of Organa's growing influence and infuriated by the sympathies the man nursed for the rebel Alliance.

The Senate President had plans to protect from Organa and his fellow travelers, plans still over a year away in fruition. Unlike Emperor Caril, Warlan Dahke would not, could not, depend on the magic of Tarkin's building a death machine to eliminate noisome bodies like the Alderaani. It was time, Dahke decided -- noting that every spoke of the wheel-like hall, whatever the chatty inclinations of its various inhabitants, was attentively still -- to initiate the practical.

The code he patched into his wristcomp was innocently random. Allatah Dinaric would understand,
though, and she was a most efficient Jesseran.
Dahke sat back in his chair when he had finished.
Enjoy your speech, Bail, he thought, returning his
attention to the floor. Alla's waiting to deliver
your good night kiss.

Organa switched off his comp, dimming his notes. "This has been a grim recitation, my fellows," he said, "and all too commonplace these days. After years of enduring an adulterated Star Fleet, corrupt corporations that feed off our taxes, the presumption of our ports, and the terrorization of many peoples, the Emperor is reaching further in his greed. I have received, in my office as Viceroy, an ultimatum from his Most Avaricious Excellency. It states -- and I am paraphrasing for we all know that High Centergalactic is used solely as a screen these days -- that unless I make a formal petition to the Throne, publicly acknowledging that I will cease and desist in my debate with Imperial

policy within this body of representatives, that Alderaan will be declared, in my name, a rogue planet, subject to immediate martial law, with all her funds and resources forfeit to the Emperor." A clatter of Deseratine spoke out more loudly than the murmurs that wove through the Senate at this claim; Organa addressed the reptilian senator personally. Senator Chraytaz, the threat has finally filtered down through the galactic protection rhetoric, through the claimed needs for discipline on lesser worlds, through this universal charade, to a Centerworld, to one of the Five Homeworlds, my fellows, to Alderaan! And my apologies to those of you from our beleaguered middle- and rim-worlds when I imply a greater horror here, for you know as well as I that your status has caused your difficulties to be put aside. Alderaan is not Orca or Pythos! Bestine and Urt already play slave to Om; Xet bows to its own mad master. Alderaan is all that is left of our most ancient and honored heritage; we have nothing this Empire needs! And we have been unarmed since the Clone Wars!"

Because you've got every dammed ship out flying for the dammed rebels! Dahke fumed, furious that such a stupid maneuver had not been known to him. Trying to shut Bail Organa up by threatening Alderaan was idiocy, sheer idiocy. Playing into the Father-be-dammed Alliance hands... Half of Dahke's mind kept track of those senators who joined the Deseratines in angry objection; the other half raced over plots and counterplots and contingency plans all made necessary by the news. Leave it to a one-track Aguent like Caril to jump the tone... should have terminated Organa long before...

"I cannot, of course, allow such threats to be implemented. Were this a simple matter of assassination, I would not divulge my trouble to you. Much of my life was murdered long ago, on an afternoon in highsummer on Alderaan."

Mention of the fall of the Jedi Enclave did not bring the usual high level of unease among the senators. Organa had laid his ground well; Dahke was not pleased.

"No, my own safety matters little. There <u>are</u> others who keep the faint glimmer of better days alive in these unhappy spaces, beings -- outlaws -- far braver than I."

Who will go the way you do? Dahke rumbled as he leaned forward, eyes narrowed. What are you up to, you...

"Yet, in the end, I am more than a senator. I am $-\mbox{--}$

A breeding rebel, Dahke finished irritably. Will you get this over with so I can make a proper spectacle of you, you foolish dreamer?

"-- the guardian of my people, heir to the ancient stewardship of Alderaan, Viceroy and proclaimed choice of the World Family. Because our enemies no longer threaten me but my people, like the honorless clones they are -- I resign."

And with that Organa turned and left his desk.

Dahke slammed his palm against a crystal tone

on his console. Aides came to attention in all parts of the Imperial Centre; co-conspirators stopped and hastened to tie in. Tapes that fed into Dahke's compbanks froze the reactions of every senator Dahke had ever watched and been wary of.

"WHAT?! NO! No, you can't!"

He heard the voice peripherally, paid it no attention. There -- Orca, Dotar, even great Ves, any half-dozen of the worlds that looked to Alderaan for some mythical hope were stunned. Could it be they hadn't known? No, not so important a decision, but...but Dahke could not dismiss the evidence of his eyes. Even Nolec Faffston of Rynan, for all his polished air of noninvolvement, was sitting too stunned, too pale beneath his everpresent sun coloring, unmoving since the first shock. Dahke longed to qualify his perceptions, but every instinct he had honed since his youth read indeniable astonishment in the Ryllan -- and even as the Bestinian watched, the only movement Faffston made was to wince ever so slightly at a persistant voice in the clamor surrounding the Alderaani.

"You can't, Father! Don't let them force you --"

By the Father? Dahke homed his comeye on the Organa retinue as it struggled to make a way through the senators massed about it. A small figure appeared among the bodies, pulling at people to listen, protesting in that insistent voice.

"No! This isn't the end of my father's influence, Senator! He would never --"

Good gods...his daughter. Disgusted, Dahke diverted the audio and turned his attention to elsewhere. Then he saw Faffston cringe again at the voice, and was comforted. Bail Organa had pulled a fast one, not only on the Senate and the Emperor, but on his allies as well. Faffston was nervous, as well he might be. The Alderaani had held his hand without counsel; whatever card he played next would be as wild for the Alliance as for the Empire.

Dahke called for order on the floor at last; the Alderaani were gone, the matter closed as far as any of them had better be concerned. There was business to get done before the holiday, and Warlen Dahke was not interested in being held up longer than necessary.

There was a great deal of replanning to be done.

30

"Senator Organa, certainly you have some comment to make!"

 $^{\prime\prime}\text{I}$ said all that needed to be said on the floor. $^{\prime\prime}$

"But Alderaan's position in the Senate! Senator, please!"

"Excuse me; pardon me. My family is waiting."

Dahke gestured; an aide keyed in another newstape. All the bodies and minds he needed waited and watched with him in his most private of offices. One day they would rule the galaxy; today they were ready to plot their course safely through yet another wave in Imperial politics.

 $\hbox{\tt ''Mistress\ Organa! \ Mistress,\ one\ comment,}\\ please!\hbox{\tt ''}$

'Did you know, Lady Eymone? Was this all part of -"

Dahke scowled. Lilan Eymone was an outspoken woman, offensive to Bestinian sensibilities, and as administrator of Alderaan, unimportant. He reached over to switch the tape himself.

"...will the Viceroy do now that he's forsaken his power to influence the $\mbox{{\tt Emp}}$ --"

"He hasn't forsaken anything!!"

The presidential finger paused just short of a touchtone.

"And if you ever think my father is a coward, you'll be sadly mistaken one day!"

"Girl didn't have much chance," Dahke heard an aide mutter. "Take after the father <u>or</u> the mother and either way she's hopeless."

"Leia! That's enough. Gentlefolk, no questions."

"But he said --"

The newsound, a tall, lithe man with an insolent manner, laughed. "Pardon me, shortstuff, but your father has just put the Organa sword in storage. Threats are a part of the business. You don't turn and run --"

The slap cracked in the speaker. There was hearty laughter behind the President, and a comment or two to make him smile. There's a spoiled little princess, he thought, watching Eymone sternly take her daughter's arm to pull her away. Poppa bringing her to Om has given her big ideas.

"And if you think this is the last the Empire's heard from the Organas..." the girl was making a valiant effort to ignore her mother's firm grip, "...you're mistaken. My father is Viceroy; he has to think of Alderaan first. But --"

"But what, little girl?" The newsound again. "You planning to tweek the Emperor's nose instead?"

Leia Organa froze, her gaze fixed on the young man. The other newsounds fell silent -- that young man was being excessively provocative -- and even Eymone paused, murmuring only about how ridiculous this all was.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," the child answered, the words barely escaping the tiny teeth of her practiced royal smile. "When I decide, I'll make sure you're the first to know."

''You do that, sweets; I'll be waiting. Maybe by then you'll be old enough to --''

"And that is quite enough!" Eymone broke in. She pulled her daughter back angrily, the picture comical in contrast with the loud laughter among the President's group. Dahke almost let his attention slip again -- woman and child were at the door and stepping through -- but the girl stopped one last time. She turned back to face the newsounds and the look on her face made the Bestinian pause. She smiled again, but this time it was a smile which betrayed a hunger that Dahke knew well. It danced before his eyes long after the door had closed on mother and daughter, and the tape had ended.

"That reporter," he said thoughtfully, sinking back in his chair. And the girl, what can be done with the girl? "Who is he? Why the leading questions; what's his game?"



A stocky Bestinian, impeccably dressed, with a manner and voice that cultivated confidence, looked up from his seat. "Nothing to worry about, Warlan," Giy Keesta assured. "He's one of ours. A Jocktobyt and a fast thinker, eh?"

"Jocktobyt?!" Dahke snapped. "I said, what's his name?"

The cadre's propagandist stood up quickly, but smoothly, stepping to Dahke's side to lean reassuringly over the President's chair. "aVairly, Warlan, but not to worry --"

"Dammit, aVairly is corelli derivative. What's his kin name, his colors?" Dahke was being petty; the Jocktobyts had been eradicated long ago, with the Jedi and any other fighting groups unwilling to cooperate with the Empire. But even the memory of power could be dangerous. Dahke trusted nothing left over from the old Republic.

"Warlan," the man insisted, "we've had him before. He's harmless; he knows the flow."

Fist against mouth, Dahke thought. "All right, Keesta. That was a good question; see that he knows we appreciate it." The President turned the chair and faced his Jesseran assassin. "Dinaric, lift the work on Organa." He turned again. "Garold, what do you think of that little act we just saw?"

Long accustomed to the President's odd turns of mind, the older man answered casually. "Lilan Eymone is a hard woman to read, Warlan. I suppose she's ticked off that Bail didn't --"

"Lift the work? Why, in the name of Centre, Mr. President?! Why?"

"Garold, I was asking about the girl, not her mother! And Dinaric, I don't pay you to ask questions! Do any of you," he passed an impatient hand across the array of aides, "do any of you have any imaginative opinions on this Organa girl?"

The shuffling silence was broken by a man in Star Fleet drab, a tall, bulky Bestinian with an ever-present sneer to his lip. "I can't help but think, Warlan," said Admiral Sohm Motti, Adjutant to the Governor of the Outer Regions, "that Tarkin's project will be finished in two or so repyears. And by then..."

Dahke picked up the thought, nodding, silently hoping that Motti's ambitions would never reach too far; he would be a difficult man to replace. "And by then, the Alliance will have had to have made its move. And for that, Organa must be free of his governmental duties."

"I can't see Bail giving up his influence," another aide insisted. "He'll just put another crony in his place."

"And if he's going to give his efforts fully to the Alliance, shouldn't we --" The Jesseran woman stopped at Dahke's gesture.

"Of course, he's going to want to keep his influence, Dyer-witt! And as for the Alliance -- let him dive in. Let him get them moving out of their holes against Tarkin. Let him let us eliminate all of them at once!"

"Of course," Motti murmured, "that's a fairly big satellite out there."

Dahke scowled at him. "I should think some people would be all too aware of dear Lex's plans to be next Emperor. Don't let that machine dazzle you too much, Admiral." The President pushed his chair further away from his desk and regarded his circle of hopefuls with ill-disguised condescension.

"The point -- are you all listening? -- is this: Tarkin will take care of the rebels Organa flushes out, Motti will take care of Tarkin, and we will take advantage of this most efficient opportunity the Viceroy has given us to totally destroy Alderaani influence without unattractive side effects."

"You're talking about the girl," Dyer-witt said carefully.

"In fact, I'd like to see Caril's face when he learns I didn't take the bait and terminate...of course I'm talking about the girl!" Dahke snapped. "-witt, do something useful, will you: help Alla make certain dear Bail gets off planet safely? Keesta: get our Alderaani input on the com. Gentlefolk, we have some politicking to do for little Leia Organa."

常

Had it worked?

Her mother pulled her hither and yon, like a child, with a grip that defied breaking, and all that was on Leia Organa's mind was one question:

Was it working: were all the pieces fitting in line; were the people reacting and acting as they ought, as was hoped for; would all of them, the principals and friends, survive to see the outcome?

They were out of the Senate Complex now, traveling amidst worried looks and uncertain actions. Not all of the Alderaani aides had been told of the session's surprise; not all were able to maintain even well-practiced diplomatic calmness in the face of such danger. For all they knew the Viceroy's decision could mean their deaths; if not at the Emperor's wish, then at the hands of someone, anyone, whose delicate plotting had been upset by Organa's actions.

But if it had worked...Leia knew, rationally, where the weak points were, how things might fail, but she could not internalize the possibilities. Her heart pounded only with the energy needed to meet the simplicity of the moment; until they were away and free, nothing else could matter except the reality of each breathing second as it passed. The breadth of her sights had narrowed; her self-perception had sharpened as never before. Schoolish generalities, the layers upon layers of history and politics she had been trained in, drilled in exclusively for three years now, were all honed by the needs of involvement and the whetstone of responsibility to a point that drove her relentlessly forward.

The transport, the ferry, the blacksuited officers and white-shelled troopers were only pieces in a puzzle, strands of a web she and her father and others were spinning. The safe crossing of the Omnan scooter to the <code>Diapf</code> could not mute her tingling perceptions. (Just big enough for her party and two crewers, the shuttle was expendable—cheap for the price should this be where those who bore no love for the Organas chose to act. But no explosion came, and they disembarked safely.)

On the <code>Diapf</code>, among friends, <code>Leia's pulse still raced. It worked, it worked, only Father remains...and only this last wait, the vigil for <code>BailOrgana</code>, kept her still when she wanted to dash</code>

about and shout. Protocol be dammed, she promised herself as the Lady Eymone, still grimly holding her daughter, led her through the ship to the family quarters. When Father's aboard I will cheer and dance and nothing will stop us then!

Her mother took a brush from a chest after doing no more than drop her outerwrap on a bench. Leia sighed and came over to the bedside, folding her legs under herself to sit and be groomed. She knew the brushing soothed her mother's nerves; they had sat like this before, on Alderaan, awaiting word that Bail Organa had survived one more Senate indiscretion.

"There is more of me in yourself than you suspect, Leia," her mother said, unexpectedly. "You have to let that part grow now. You want to dance and jump about, to throw yourself into the battle..." The brush halted, disbelieving, then continued. "But your father's way will only work on Alderaan now. When the Selection is finished, when you have returned to Om and the Court...then you must forget all the noise and posturing. You will be careful. You will sit and wait and measure your words, and never, ever, give our enemies the slightest doubt to capitalize on.

"Being like your father brought you to this decision. You are your father's daughter, Leesi -- gods know you are. But being my daughter will keep you alive."

The words settled heavily about Leia; her excitement was thinning, stretched by the solitude of the room and her mother's admonitions. Leia knew Lilan was not given to exposition. She put a hand to her hair as if to protest the darkening mood. "Don't braid it, Madr. You know I like it down."

"And so would the males in Centre."

"Madr! We're talking about revolution and the Senate, not some courtier's ball!"

"And you will learn to keep your voice down, and your eyes guarded. No anger, except what you have rehearsed; no anxiety, except what you keep inside of you."

"Marvelous, one long court reception. Leia Organa sits out the war looking demure in the Senate. I'm going to be more than a Senator, Mother. I'm going to be the Alliance's eye on the Court... without braids!"

Skilled hands twisted a long plait of hair. "Your father's ways belonged to the Republic," the voice continued, unaffected by the outburst. "If you keep to them, you will be just as --"

Leia turned, brought more quickly to nervous retort by the gravity with which her mother spoke than all the day's dangers. "You don't believe, not really, do you? This is all a spice-crazy plot by a lot of desperate people, nothing realistic, isn't it? You don't think I can do it. I'm not afraid, Mother."

Keeping her troubled blue eyes steady on Leia, Lilan met the challenge by winding the chestnut hair about itself into a roll over Leia's left ear and fastened it loosely with pins from her own high gather of dusky curls. Then she gently turned her daughter's face away again and gathered the rest of the golden-tipped waves.

"I know you're not afraid, Leia. And I know you are everything your father hoped you would be. All I'm asking is that you be a little more of what \underline{I} hope for. You see, my dear willful, eager daughter, the next time I sit out this wait, it will be for you; and no, I don't want to believe that it has finally come to this."



They sat quietly. One flow of time seemed to pass as slowly for Leia as for her mother who carefully worked at the other braid; another crashed about Leia's mind like a captured light beam, bringing images of other times when assassins would wait for her. The idea would not land and let Leia explore it; eventually she abandoned the attempt. The dangers were still too new to accept personally, too alien to fully comprehend.

And then the suite doors swept open, and her father was there, tall, ever-present, ever a deterent to her doubts. "Father!" Leia shouted, scrambling to her feet, decorum ignored. "We did it!" she cried out, her exuberance unchained. She rushed toward him -- and stopped, mid-step, midsmile, at the weight of the hand that dropped on her shoulder. Yet her mother's hand was not prohibiting her from going, only alerting her to discipline. Leia still reached out, but haltingly, and in the moment that she hesitated, she saw her father's gaze dart over her shoulder. The heavy brows lifted ever so slightly in question above deep brown eyes so like hers, eyes now black with worry and weariness, and she saw his approval of her mother's quieting spirit.

"Fadr?" She ventured, confused, suddenly indecisive. He smiled and dropped his cloak near theirs; he held out a hand for his wife to grasp. Leia touched at his sleeve. "Fadr? Is it all right? Did I do it right? Did it work?"

The look in his eye brightened; the familiar mouth widened. Leia felt the wariness slip from her as he began to grin.

"Did it work?" he repeated, putting his arm about Lilan, squeezing her shoulders. "Did it work, the girl asks. Lil, did you hear that?" He slid his arm from about her mother and placed both his palms aside Leia's cheeks. "Leia, Leesi sweet, I ...oh, starfields, why all the gloom?!" And because Bail Organa could never be contained in his action for long, he dropped his hands to Leia's waist and lifted her into a swinging, wookiee-hug that whirled them both around as he cried, "Work?! Work?! Oh, my lady child, you were marvelous! It worked and we're going home and we'll win this one yet, by the Enclave; I swear we will!"

30.1

The President of the Senate, representative of the Emperor he plotted to overthrow, stood at the

center of the chamber to receive the new Senator from Alderaan. The elaborate formalities grew more complicated every year, as if gaudy ritual could mask the diminishing power of its members or offer some small recompense to a presidential office that had once been the hub of galactic power. Normally disdainful of the procedure -- the whole Senate could go to hell once he was through with it, for all he cared -- Warlan Dahke rose to the occasion this time with a grandeur that rivaled Emperor Caril. His total retinue was in attendance; all officials, military and Central Intelligence Bureau alike, were in formal attire; every senator was in attendance whether through bribery or interest. Dahke stood taller than usual this day as if to emphasize the vulnerability of the small figure he awaited. His saffron tunic was shot with shimmerthread, and his formal ultramarine robe was of such fine Redancian silk that even the thought of movement seemed to make it billow vastly about him. He wore the coveted mark of a Bestinian Judge of the Bar on the rim of his velvet cap, an ebony device that rose full from the forehead then swept behind and over his left shoulder where the emblem of the Bestinian Directorship caught the material in a gather of swirled perfection.

The girl wore white, gathered at the neck and below the breasts. Her hair was braided in a simple crown and she wore no ornament save the crossed crescent of Alderaan over the breastbone. The music accompanying her appearance stopped when she stepped into the hall proper. At the rim of the broad spoke that was Alderaan's alone by right as one of the five Homeworlds, she bowed to the ensemble. Those whose customs of physiology compelled them to follow suit as signs of their respect did so; when they had risen, those who would applaud began, and the young Senator stepped down to the runway to begin her walk to the hub.

Amused by her manner of presentation, Dahke wondered what would win this battle of impressions: Bail Organa's attempts to color his daughter with the simplicity of hope, or Dahke's own efforts to emphasize the reality of his power? He had kept a close and intrigued eye on the seriousness with which the Alderaani had taken their Selection of the new solon. Officially, in the backroom world of galactic politics, he was known to have supported an Alderaani peer amicable -- so far as Alderaan went -- to the Empire. Unofficially, he and his had exerted an unrestrained amount of influence in support of the precocious Organa child. Interestingly, much of the battle had been fought for him; the girl's changed demeanor had been none of his doing. The riotous behavior of Midyear -her inheritance from her father -- had disappeared, becoming the quiet haughtiness of Lilan Eymone. The young woman who walked toward him now showed none of the defiance her father radiated, and all of the cool deference respected at Court.

Have they tamed you, or merely rearmed you? Dahke wondered. Has the hunger for power I once saw been swept away or merely leashed? Was it an act, or a seed I can nuture? Smile for me, child, and let me match it against your eyes. Give me the measure by which to plan your price. I was your age once and eager to make my mark. Shall I show you how to throw off your father's direction, or is it your mother's confinement that chafes? You're a

young woman, little Leia, let us take you away from this dreariness and show you all the promise of Centre.

One year is such a short space in which to have to squeeze a lifetime of pleasure.

2

Lilan Eymone sat at the end of the bed, her back to the cool wall, her arms stretched out in front of her, wrists resting on her bent knees

"You haven't said a word about the Greeting Session. I thought she handled herself well."

Lilan did not look at her husband lying so close to her. "She's your child, Bail; she always has been."

" $\underline{\underline{I}}$ have barely spoken a word to her the last six weeks."

"She is a pretty girl on Om and the Imperial Court is simply the Republican Center in different colors. Some things do not change. If she were to act the daughter of Bail Organa..." Lilan closed her eyes and laughed wearily. "Dahke was watching her like a fowlog. He will lay traps for her and they will be good ones; he has had seventeen years to study you." She slid over to her husband's side and looked down on him, her expression softening her words. "She can't be like you anymore, Bail. They would kill her. You've lived by the grace of the force -- what is left of it in this foully begotten universe. Your way carried us into this; my way will at least keep Leia alive in it."

She kissed his eyes shut and was about to brush her lips on his when he spoke softly. "My way. Your way. What will be $\underline{\text{her}}$ way in the end?"

"I asked you that three years ago," she said, but without recrimination. "She'll be what the years make of her, as we all are."

His eyes, black in the dark, opened worriedly. "Sometimes I wonder if there will ever be a time again for being what you are, and not only what you must be."

"Maybe," Lilan whispered, putting her mouth on his, pulling both of them away from their worries, if only for a night.

Urt. 6100.38.7

She felt the headache coming on and paused in her pacing. The exercise was only seconds long now; her father had drilled her in it as a child and the past year had made her a master at swiftly sidetracking her body's defenses against stress. Relax the muscles, let the blood flow freely, break the sensual contact with the outside world that causes

such tension. Leia Organa wrapped both her hands about the nape of her neck and tipped her head back, knowing the attack was only being delayed. If Dohlu didn't show up soon, the evening would be lost in the painful solitude of her room.

And Leia firmly believed that if she did not escape, for only one night at least, she would slowly but surely begin to go crazy.

She had no more patience for the job of Senator, for the fruitless debates, the endless maneuvering that came to nothing but petty personal advancement or the threat of deadly reprisal should her wit slip a fraction or her awareness dim. She had thought that this reticence so determinedly nurtured by her mother would be a weapon; instead, it had become a dragging burden, a thick and dense gown that weighed her down, slowing her angry gestures, quieting her quick tongue. She knew this damping robe made her a finer tool for her father's -- Alderaan's -- the rebel Alliance's -- needs in the Senate, knew it made her think, condense her indignation and furies into deadly attacks of precise planning, concise and unarguable, but now it seemed that she was never free of it, that she could never disrobe but would carry it about herself until the day she suffocated. Sometimes, she shuddered to realize, she found herself forgetting it was there, so thoroughly had it become part of herself.

This night she would have none of it. This night she would not be smothered with caution, not if her plans went as ordered, not if Dohlu would, dammit, hurry and show up.

"Mistress Leia?"

Freezing, Leia stared at the comlink. Somewhere in the Urtian consulate, some member of her traveling party wanted to speak with her. The link sounded again, but no visual monitor light flashed on. Leia relaxed slightly; the call was only a house sweep by a minor aide who would assume no answer to mean the Senator was busy.

Leia resumed her pacing. This visit -- a courtesy Allocations mission, one more useless project Dahke had maneuvered her into -- would be her last chance for a night's freedom before returning to Om for the pre-New Year's session. Her retinue watched her too closely at Centre.

"Come on, Dohlu," she muttered, tightening the belt about her light flutterdress one more time. Self-consciously, she pulled at the indigo and crimson skirt to make certain it hung properly. She had only been allowed into shorter skirts at eighteen, and that only privately. Her father insisted she emphasize her youth at Centre and, of course, there were always the Omnan customs of longwear for both sexes to contend with. And this, and that; and the deceptions of the Court and the intrigues of Centerlife and the carefully wrought image of a contained young woman were growing boring, thoroughly boring! Not at all what she had imagined for herself when her father had asked her to help with the cause over four long years ago.

Gods, was I only thirteen when I said yes?

"Leia?"

She practically flew at the door, had it open and closed before her friend could lower the hand that had knocked. Without speaking again, both hurried down the landscaped path and past the inner wall devices sabotaged by Leia to a timed-stop pattern not of Security's making. They paused at the street gate for Leia to key an inlaid comterminal with an innocuous code certain to distract any outerwall monitor droid long enough for their escape. A moment passed. The fugitives darted down the Green, past the corner datapost, down the avenue and around a corner to where a private aircar was parked. Leia tumbled into the passenger's side; Dohlu engaged the power. The machine lifted. Leia held her breath, still expecting a cry to rise behind them, then Dohlu slammed the engine full open and the speeder shot off, leaving low-hanging leaves swirling crazily in its exhaust.

"Aiiyy-hiha!" Leia cried out; Dohlu matched her with a piercing tongue roll.

"We did it!" both shouted as Dohlu banked sharply, happily, over the riverway; hairpins flew as Leia rapidly undid her hair, shaking her head 'til the long waves of brown seemed to fill her whole side of the car. "No aides!" she shouted above the machine's roar. "No last minute consultations! No gritting your teeth and being nice to obnoxious and uninvited visitors! For one whole Centre-crazy evening -- FREE!!"

"And it's about time!" Dohlu added. "We'll show your father and his cohorts they can't ruin your whole life! And not my mother, either!"

Laughing, Leia reached over to place a hand on Dohlu's arm. The other girl, blonde, slim and far taller than Leia, was really a grown woman by Alderaani standards, though her native Bestine would judge her younger. She was the only confidant Leia had these days, the only friend who was not Alderaani and therefore in awe of her father, or who was not uninvolved with the Alliance and therefore must not be told too much. They did not see each other often enough for Leia's liking, but each visit was precious. Dohlu Eklestil was daughter and aide to Syr Eklestil, Agricultural Council Rep to Merigran and a sympathizer to the rebel cause; she was safe. She was also wise in the ways of the Empire and Centre; her family had emigrated from Bestine when then-Director Dahke had recognized the Empire, but Dohlu had returned there for schooling and had managed to weather the petty prejudice as well as the real threats encountered then. With the encouragement of both families, the girls were close friends.

"Dohlu," Leia said with an intensity almost alien to her now, "thank you for doing this. I wish we could have been together more at Centre the last fifth. Maybe I wouldn't have started to think I was going stir-crazy."

"Don't worry it, Lee. The times are crazy. Maybe it helps to be a little off. Protection, you know?"

"Yes, I do know. But..."

"But you wouldn't have listened to me anyway. You didn't the last two times Dahke ran you around."

Leia nodded without answering. Dohlu didn't know one aspect of Leia's life, not in its entirety. The various snares and diversions that beckoned at every turn of Om's ways and customs were more than Leia could burden anyone with, even her best friend. She spoke of bits and parts to Dohlu, to hear her companion react as someone a bit less cautious might, and then to mull the situation over with her advisors...if she had the time. In the beginning, such sidestepping had been easy; as the year passed, though, the offers altered, became more subtle. Almost as if they could guess her thoughts before she knew them herself, the traps opened according to her actions. Twice, as she and only she knew, Leia had almost slipped, giving the opposition the ammunition to fault her. Then, not so long ago, she found herself presented with the power necessary to save a settlement from the Imperial anger that would soon flush out the rebel organization there. The position had been all she might have dreamed of in her hopes of achieving great deeds, more than even her father had imagined...and when she had looked at it through the lenses her mother's teaching had given her, she knew her tempters knew about the rebels and were hoping she would believe she could transcend the corruption inherent in the deal. Leia had turned away, knowing she was less innocent than before.

But the intrigues kept coming to her, as if they would overwhelm her if they could not corrupt her, and Dohlu would listen to every complaint Leia made. And Dohlu would perceive the strain others took for granted, and she would plan such an escape as this.

"You realize," Leia laughed, "we're going to need a lot of protection when we get back. My father is going to be furious."

"You should have left him home; does he really think Dahke believes Bail Organa is interested in monitoring the agricultural exchange between Urt and the Merigran system?"

"I should have also cut off my ears and nose; it would have been easier."

"Well, don't brood on it then. And just you wait. When we get to this place I've got in mind, you'll have more important things to worry about, and a whole lot more fun, too."

"It's not a club, I told you that. And quit fidgeting or I turn this car back right now."

"NO!" The Senator from Alderaan shook her head firmly. "No. I don't care if you fly straight to the heart of downport. I want to have fun tonight and I want to have it where no one will recognize me and Father won't find me."

"That's what I thought."



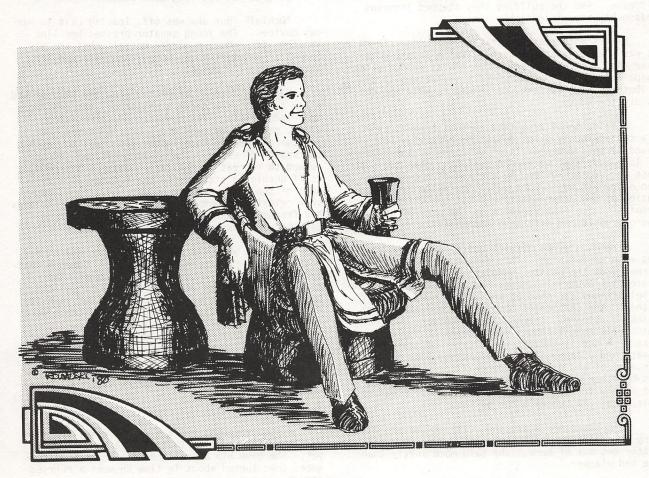
Iain aVairly eyed the Iron Wheel Tav with bemused challenge. He went through this mental indecision every time he came downport: to brave the catcalls, or worse, the indifference, of the corelli he would meet in the spacers' bars, or to go back up-port, where he belonged, yet where he would always feel like an historical anomaly, always adrift, always alone. Downport inevitably won the argument.

"Slumming tonight, then, old boy," he told himself as he straightened his belt about his skirted tunic. The Jocktobyt clothing only made life more difficult, but lately Iain had been feeling feisty about his heritage, dim as it was. Let the Corellians snicker; let the Frielen snort in disdain. Jockto had neither slipped into the content ethnocentricity of its parent world, nor fallen victim to the genetic frenzies of its fellow colony. Its proud, quixotic mercenaries had served Republic and many a World Family with honor and corelli cleverness. If the planet lay in ruins now, her people eking a poor existence under military rule; if her warrior family kinfolds were dead, the suspicion of survivors tactfully ignored in the galactic stream of universal citizens that claimed no homeworld; if the name Jacktobyt produced as much laughter these days as mention of the Jedi, or the Mayon Words of Honor, or the Deseratine Soulherders, well... Iain fingered the trim of his tunic sleeve, a crimson band that matched the huearray of colors lining his cloak, and thought the hell with them all. He was corelli and if he had to come downport to share in what was left of his heritage, he would. What his up-port friends

didn't know wouldn't puzzle them.

The Tay was better lit than most like places. Iain bought himself a pitcher of kleven and found a back table from which he could watch the crowd and indulge in a newsound's whimsy by imagining stories about the disparate customers of the Iron Wheel. This assortment tonight was better dressed than most, probably a reflection of their ability to afford a place so close to the invisible but unmistakable boundary between up and downport. Iain anticipated an enjoyable evening with less than the usual amount of fisticuffs. Good, he smiled to himself, a little brew, a little dancing, a game or two -- he noted a quick fight in a corner, two Onogans arguing over a sabacc competition that ended quickly with a call for the servers to drag out the body -- and then home. No, not bad at all. Iain turned his chair to face the bandstand where the musicians were returning and leaned an elbow back on the table. Dancers were gathering on the floor now; the corelli who jammed the Tav were making ready the evening's entertainment.

A scent, its light sweetness sharply alien among the working odors of the tavern, swept past aVairly then, bringing instant visions of cleanly swept halls and crystal fountains. Two young women crossed his gaze, two girls whose dress and posture and perfume belonged on an uptown boulevard, not in the evening lights of a place like the Iron Wheel. Iain sat up, his reporter's curiosity tingling



before such incongruity. He was certain he knew the taller one from somewhere; he never forgot a face. Couldn't see the other at the moment.

The two stood at the edge of the dance floor, watching the beginning squares, whispering between themselves. The taller one, blonde, respectably built, Bestinian or Urtian, he surmised, did not hesitate to show her blunt curiosity about the place or its customers, sizing the room up like a caterer for a reception. Iain shook his head at the foolishness of bored, wealthy children, risking health and virtue for a night's entertainment. He hoped they weren't wearing any jewels. If they had gone just a little deeper into downport -- Iain sat straight up, stunned. The tall one had stepped aside, pointing at an emptying table, leaving the other girl, short, nicely built, brunette, to turn and gaze after her. Iain stared at the vision, a rush of newsound's luck surging through him, an exhilaration that tonight was colored with the added excitement of danger.

What in the name of all the kinfolds was Leia Organa of Alderaan doing at the Iron Wheel Tay?



They had not gone very far into downport after all, just across the Avenue. In fact, the cross-roads area barely seemed like a rough part of town at all; Leia had seen worse in her travels for Alderaan. And the building they stepped into was reasonably new, if garishly lit.

Leia's enthusiasm wavered once inside. There it was obvious that the newness was a front, a veneer that sheltered a spirit as old as wooden waterships and mountain bands of self-styled wealth distributors. The furnishings seemed equally ancient, as did the smoke.

Wetting her lips with a nervous tongue, Leia glanced anxiously about Dohlu and herself. She found herself momentarily disoriented by a cacophony of languages that were more confusing than the busiest marketplace on Om, by a clash of bodily odors too overwhelming to sort out. The noise and edgy motion of the crowd within was not comforting; the promise of imminent violence on the part of anyone there aroused her defensive mechanisms.

Afraid, she was afraid, but in a way she was not experienced with. This danger she felt was different from the polite, undulating threats that permeated the Imperial Senate, and much closer than the rebel actions she studied and talked over with her father. The challenges here were immediate, harsh, quick to resolve. There! In the corner, two Onogans tumble amidst shouts and screams of "hold your fire!" A shrill shriek, the clatter of tables and chairs and a lanky, almost serpentine body falls to the edge of the dimly lit dance floor. More shouts, but by other customers now; not calls for troops, but simply irritated urgings, "Hey, you! Clean up this mess! Aw, where's the barkeep?!"

Leia broke her stare and realized she was digging her fingers into Dohlu's arm. "Perhaps we'd better get out of here," she said more softly than she had planned.

"I thought you wanted to get away to the real world," the Bestinian girl whispered back, her smile almost hiding her own hesitation.

There was an awkward look in Dohlu's eyes as she glanced down at Leia, but her quick smile wiped it away. "Don't worry. I've been here before, remember? Come on, let's go watch the dance."

Leia followed obediently, but not without a worried bite at her lip. She stepped past a couple so wrapped up in each other they didn't notice her roughly brushing one of their branches. She wondered which planet they were from; neither looked like any arborea she had ever seen. But, she reminded herself sternly, the club -- tavern -- was filled mostly with humans or closely related humanoids; right now, the Iron Wheel Tav itself was about as alien an entity as she could handle.

There were mostly starhoppers on the floor, corelli, as Dohlu pointed out, comparing dances she and Leia knew with the formations being made. Fascinated, Leia wondered how they managed all those fancy steps with their weapons still strapped to their hips.

"Look," Dohlu said suddenly. "There's a table. I'll go grab it; you flag down a server."

"Dohlu?" But she was off, leaving Leia to her own devices. The young senator pressed her lips together in a moue, reminded herself that she was indeed a competent young woman, and returned her attention to the dance.

Swooping into a three-step end, the band paused a few seconds then began a patter of jigs and reels and random riffs. The dancers themselves stood about, gathered by twos and fours, a person here and there breaking into improvised steps to match the snatch of music. The menace Leia had sensed seemed to retreat to the far shadows of the room, as if unable to stand up to the boisterous liveliness of the high-stepping crowd. Leia found herself relaxing, remembering times she and her friends had frequented the dancethons at OldCity during Galactic New Year celebrations on Alderaan.

In fact, when the formations began again, her foot insisted on tapping to the beat. Someone nearby started to slap a table top in rhythm. The dance apparently had words, a mixture of Galactic, Deseratine and what Leia surmised, to her surprise, to be formal Corellian. Dohlu had said these were Independents and Leia had always heard...well, what's the matter, anyway. This is fun. In fact, this is just fine. No security, not an advisor in sight, no prying eyes and nosy officials. Leia shook back her hair as she had done in the speeder and with the same defiant surge of freedom. I like this, do you hear me all you bothersome old badgers? I like this!

A spacer caught her eye with a wave, but she wasn't quite ready for that close a contact. Not yet. She gave him a practiced glance of indifference, then turned about in time to meet a harried server.

"A bottle of Dustflower '96, please, and two glasses," she said smoothly, her usual confidence shining through her doubts at last. "To that table over there." She overpaid the woman, but did not care. She slid onto her chair at the table gracefully, a broad and mischievious grin on her face.

Dohlu laughed and nudged her arm conspiratorially. The music was too loud right now to hear what her friend said, but that didn't matter either. The place was old, but the music was good; the hour was early, the folk were spacers and genuine riffraff, but Leia had faced even Warlan Dahke's tempers and had survived. She was not fazed.

And Father would never, ever find her here.

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Iain noted, with a smile, that the girls were quickly dancing, albeit with the awkwardness of ignorance. He pondered the quaint problem of mixing cultures awhile before realizing that he had been wrong: only one of the girls was dancing. The other had taken to the floor for a turn, then had sat back down to nurse her glass of wine. aVairly noted the brand and the color and was surprised that this place had had it in store; then he thought he might taste a little of it himself. While the good Senator danced, he would plunder the charms — and informations — of the companion. There had to be a story in here, somewhere.

He ambled over to the half-empty table and slid his long legs under it before any objection could be made. "Now why," he said quite sincerely, "should a lovely lady like yourself let her friend have all the fun tonight?"

He was ignored. More than ignored, actually; the girl put on her best look-right-through-them expression and swept across his face twice, a gesture certain to reduce most humans to tidy, bleeding packages that dribbled away into the shadows. Iain had often considered the possibility that Bestinians taught their children to be rude before they taught them to smile, but answered happily anyway. "Won't work, honey," he said with a downport drawl he saved for occasions like this. "I work with your people every day of my life. I can outcut you anytime, or at least heal faster than a lawyer can choke. Forged ego here, impervious to damage."

"I don't dance," Dohlu said coolly. "My friend knows the steps; I don't."

"Nonsense, neither one of you can have been anywhere near a corelli dancemeet for more than one tenth of your combined lives." Iain had switched back to the clipped accents of Centergalactic immediately, earning a suspicious glance from the girl. "You're down here slumming the same as I am. As a matter of fact, I'm certain I've seen you about the Court. What say we hit the floor and show these folks some civilized faststeps?"

Iain was certain she had never used that particular look on anyone Centerside; it was far too venomous for the sensibilities of the genuinely diplomatic, at least in public. His sense for a story grew stronger, warring with his earlier plans

for a simple night off.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she was saying. "And that line is regressively unimaginative. Leave the table, please." When he didn't budge, she added, "Look, I can see you're Corellian so the Court story doesn't fly. I'm not buying your line --"

"Jocktobyt," he corrected. "I'm Jocktobyt. There's a difference."

Her sapphire eyes narrowed. Iain pulled back mentally from the expression, one he saw often enough at Centre. There were those ambitious ones who feared any suggestion of power in another being, even just the echo of past military prowess. Iain had survived the massacres, had changed his name, had done everything he could to prove himself harmless to the Establishment, but he knew there would always be those eager to wipe out even the slim memory he inspired. This girl was not unaware of such complications in the life of someone who called himself Jocktobyt.

"All the more reason to leave us alone," she said tightly, "If you truly have seen me Centerside."

"You or your friend?"

"I think that's obvious."

"Of course it is." He discovered he was irritated at having to apologize for himself yet one more time and that irritated him further. As for the Senator, damn it all, but he was a better Imperial than she was by a long shot! He ought to be worried about being seen with her! "Of course it's wiser to let the young Organa Princess run around loose in a spacers' bar than to be seen with me. Makes all the sense in the universe. Have you forgotten the kinfolds are twenty years dead and have either of you the slightest idea of the real danger you're in here?"

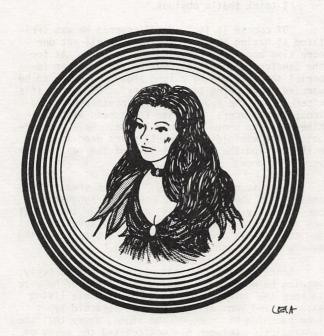
"This is getting boring," she answered, calm again. "If you don't leave now, I'll suggest to one of your very much alive cousins over there that you're bothering me. Corellians just love to fight and they always have been a lot less discriminating over who with than your people were."

Score one for the lady, Iain thought bitterly, knowing he would not, could never, fight if he were to keep the quiet reputation that paid his living expenses and kept all those power-paranoid types from punching his number. He stood, angry that the contradiction between his actions and the array of kinfold colors he wore about his shoulders was so cavalierly exposed, hating the girl's adeptness at pinpointing the failure he was so clever at ignoring elsetimes.

Unwilling to grant her a total victory, he poured himself a generous helping of the expensive Alderaani wine, drank it down like kleven and left the glass spinning on the table. Not until he turned about was he certain what he would do next, and then it was with a certain rebellious grin that he strode off to join the segueing dance and Senator Leia Organa.

The set was ending. Leia could recognize the changing tunes and rhythms now. Letting her attention wander for a moment, she nearly lost her step. A firm hand at her elbow caught her; a voice chuckled at what she had muttered to herself about clumsiness. She looked up to see a tall man of indeterminate youngish age gesturing at her square partner in a manner other corelli had used. Leia knew enough about the race to recognize steriles by their coppery complexions and to understand why she had been paired with one in her square, but she was ignorant of how status was judged, and of the rules of courtesy between such and fertiles. This man seemed to think he had the right to butt in; the sterile -- his name was Hest -- did not.

A few other dancers had gathered, apparently to referee, when without warning and as if the band had sensed possible trouble, a totally different style of dance music sang out and the crowd rearranged itself. Her old partners muttered a word or two at the stranger, shrugged at Leia, and left the floor. Confused, still feeling the stab of fear she had experienced at the first sounds of ugliness, Leia was caught off guard by the man, and allowed herself to be swept back onto the dance floor in a partner routine.



This is ridiculous, her practical side scolded. You should stop and withdraw at once. This man is a stranger and you owe the others the courtesy of turning him down.

This is ridiculous, all right, the side of her that was enjoying a style of dance more familiar to her feet thought. He's nearly 180 centies tall! How does he expect me to two-step with him when he's as big as those arborea over -- oh, come now!

The music had slowed into a medley of various world tunes, breaking any last semblance of corelli group dancing. There were some objections raised, but a chorus of alien retorts quieted the corelli. Twosome dancing pleased the other human races present, as well as a few others, and they were glad for the change.

Leia noted that her rude partner did not seem to be bothered by their height difference -- she wondered if there were some sort of length requirement for corelli legs; did they order them at forty centies, minimum? -- but rested his arms on her shoulders after setting her hands on each side of the wide tooled belt he wore about his tunic.

He wasn't difficult to look at: blue eyes, light brown hair, a face that lay somewhere between corellian angularity and Frielen softness. Nicely built, also, however strange his taste in clothes -- which didn't look bad on him at all, she conceded, just unusual. Leia mentally made allowances, considering the present society and whatever odd customs were practiced downport, and decided that given the circumstances, he was interesting. If she were going to become acquainted with anyone here tonight, it might as well be someone who appeared a bit more civilized.

"A little more civilized style of dancing," he said, confirming her thoughts. "For the lady from Centre." Before she could react, he added quietly, "A few words of warning, though, for wandering senators. I can understand a body wanting to see how downport plays, but I don't understand wanting to see it alone. This is not a safe place for you, little lady. There just might be someone here, someone besides me, who watches newstapes; someone who just might have an eye for ransomable little girls, and a powerful hunger for high-priced ransoms."

Leia was furious, absolutely furious. "Someone besides you?!!" she retorted passionately, too incensed at being found out to notice that his words echoed her first doubts.

He looked at her oddly a moment, startled. "Look, let's not play games, Senator. I know who you are; I was just offering some advice, and maybe a walk back to your taxi. I'm corelli, but I'm not a --"

"Not Corellian, not in that get up," a passerby laughed loudly and nudged his partner. "Didn't know there were any of this type still running around loose. Be careful, honey, his kind still believe in whilltales."

"Why don't you go --"

"Why don't both of you back off?" said a third voice, belonging to a Frielen sterile who pulled the Corellian back a step or two. "Come on, TNiza, Jocktobyts never had any brains but for fighting; take away the kinfolds and all they've got left're the pretty clothes. Let'm be."

Leia was certain the man was going to react violently to the insult, but though his fists clenched, he did nothing. "I think I'll go join my friend," she said, pulling away from his side. Her

anger dissipated with the sudden threat of a fight, replaced with cooler caution. It was time to make an exit.

"I was only trying to help," he said, stopping Leia with not too gentle a hand, ignoring the other corelli. "I do know my way around -- this isn't just a costume, no matter what this backburner pirate says...Oh, what's the use?" His mood flipped suddenly; he raised his hands in a helpless gesture that made the Corellian scowl, then reached over to pat Leia's cheek. She stepped back further, evading all but the slightest touch of his fingertips. "I'm a fool and you're a fool," he said. "That's the way things are, and damned if I'll change them. Good luck, shortstuff. It's a hungry world out there." With that, he closed his cape about himself, hiding the vibrant huearray lining, and stepped off the dance floor. He disappeared into the tavern crowd without a look back.

"You should've left the guy alone, Niz," Leia heard the Frielen saying as she turned back to her table. "Y'can't blame the 'byt for wanting the old days back; there's worse things to be crazy over."

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"Damn." He'd made a fool of himself back there all right, Iain thought harshly as he left the Iron Wheel. What had gotten into his head he couldn't fathom. Playacting, that's all he did. Put on a costume and you think you're the great hero. Suddenly the tunic that was so like the ground battle dress he had seen his father wear, and the cape of colors with hues left over from the twelve Communities of Corell to be woven into new meanings on Jockto, were itchy, burdensome draperies. The fancy blade he wore with them was only a vanity. He'd tried to help, as he'd been taught long ago, before everything changed: Corellians still had their infamous Honor and Frielen were known for their loyalties once given, but the Jocktobyt notions of Duty had died with the fighting families. Iain had buried all of them long ago; it was time to bury the rest.

There would be no more visits Downport, he told himself; no more colors and fancy dress; no more indulgences.

He reached the downport boundary, a crossing of two major passageways, one leading to the heart of the city, the other bounding the long industrial edge of Urt's capital megalopolis. His steps slowed, his senses uneasy. It was still early evening, the streets had every reason to be busy, and yet...aVairly spotted the anomaly quickly and began counting the number of official persons he saw among the crowd. The number was far too high for midweek, even on the edge of downport. None of the Imperials stayed too long in one place, they flowed over the imaginary boundary easily. But, the newsound noted, their numbers never decreased. As for armored patrols, yes, they flowed through the crowd more often than one might expect. Something was up. Iain thought about hanging about, but his readings also told him there was time yet. He'd go have a drink up the street, then pick up some equipment from his speeder. He always carried some with him, even on a night off. He was a newsound;

he really ought to remember that, he told himself.

Crossing the exchange, he headed for a lounge in the plaza, a low-keyed place where the entertainment was sexy and where no one remembered what a Jocktobyt tunic looked like.

Stopping on the other corner for another assessment of the crowd's composition, his thoughts were distracted by a remnant whiff of the little Alderaani's perfume. He glanced down the avenue in the direction of the Iron Wheel Tav and made a grim face. Trouble was brewing tonight and if that reckless senator weren't lucky, she'd be in the middle of it. He'd warned her, and that brusque friend of hers. Iain ran through his newsound's memory again and still failed to trace her face.

He shrugged. His warning was a lot more than many would have done. Nothing left to do but stay in the area and cover the story, if there were one. And if the girls were in it, well, he'd try to be kind to the little one at least.

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"Just some muzzleass who wasn't minding his own business," was Dohlu's assessment of the strange man. She poured Leia some more wine, then leaned on her elbows and smiled at her friend. "Having fun? You sure look like you are."

Leia laughed, then giggled as the sound brought encouraging cheers from a nearby table. Even the cautions of her erstwhile dance partner faded away in the friendly energy she felt surrounding her. No, she probably shouldn't be sitting at this table, in this bar, but the only one who had recognized her had left. No, she shouldn't be here even unrecognized, but, gods, the freedom was heady.

"Dohlu, you have to come out and dance. You're taller than I am and maybe you can keep these giants from tripping over me."

Her friend shook a few blonde curls loose as she declined. "No, this is your night out. Besides, someone has to watch the table."

"Stars, this is wonderful," Leia said wistfully, staring beyond her glass. "Sometimes I feel like a tape on rerun. Just a holo of my father; a readout of policy; a -- a prerecord droid, just like they call me behind my back."

"You've done your own work, Leia. The important people always notice that."

"And it all takes place in the middle of some dark stage. The plots, the counterploys, the innuendoes. It's all a cover, a distraction from what's really happening outside of Court. Dohlu, the Empire is taking over people's lives out there and all I'm doing for the Alliance is sitting on my backend saying 'No, President Dahke, I don't think we should, President Dahke; Senator you-know-who, do you really think this course of action is wise?; Yes, Father, I'll be sure to tell them that.' Nothing but a puppet. If I were on Alderaan, at least I'd be helping Mother administer or negotiate with other systems. I'd have some real power. Father says he's trying to protect me from the darker side

"Leia," Dohlu interjected sternly, "if I hear one more word about your damn Alliance, or your Senate seat, or your father...! Besides, I thought it was to free him for the outside action that you took over the shadowplay in the Senate. You keep on like this and I'll begin to think you think you can saye the universe itself!"

"Ah," Leia began to laugh, with a sigh at first, then wholeheartedly as she shook off her lowering mood. "All right, all right, I see the point. No more politics tonight, just fun. Right?"

"Right. Sometimes I think you still don't realize where that kind of reasoning can lead a person."

"No, you were trained to be a rebel hero. Your father and my mother, quite a pair. There are worse things than sitting on your backside in the Senate, you know; worse at least for senators who constantly give the President looks that tell him he can drop dead any time now, thank you."

Leia shrugged in rueful acknowledgment of the mentioned slip in diplomacy. "You think I'm foolish, too, don't you?"

Dohlu sighed and poured herself a full glass of wine. "I know you are, Leia."

"Now who's being pessimistic? I shall, ahem, madam, take your words to heart and attempt to control my infamous Organa temper in the future. I'm afraid I lost it with that man I was dancing with, though, when he said pretty much the same thing."

"Forget that man!" Leia looked up sharply and started to answer, but Dohlu put her glass aside and took Leia's hand. "Come on," she added quickly. "Forget what we just said. This is supposed to be a good time. Let's dance."

30

Iain blinked, but the man was still there, sitting at the long bar, watching the lounge customers with as acute an eye as a newsound. Now what in the godshead on Heildie is Giy Keesta doing this far from Centre? The Jocktobyt gave his glass of bubbled nectar an intense examination, but the Bestinian was still at the bar when he looked up. In fact, Keesta saw him and gestured aVairly to come over.

Incapable of redemption, that's what this evening is. Iain found Keesta's presence and summons as irritating as that Bestinian girl's snide remarks. He tagged a server and instructed the catten to transfer his tab; if Keesta were going to pop up and remind Iain of his political obligations, Keesta would just have to pay for the privilege. aVairly didn't like the Bestinian's friends, but their money was good, and if the galactic news must be managed, he preferred to know what was admitted and what was omitted. The proximity to power he

had earned was also satisfying, whatever the aftertaste. Getting a little of his own back in an odd way. Yes, Iain was quite easy about letting Keesta pick up the bill.

"Charming outfit," the Bestinian commented smoothly as Iain leaned on the bar next to him. "I didn't know the new fashions were dabbling with nostalgia. Rather early in the regime to be sporting such wear, don't you think, my boy?"

On the other hand, he didn't need any more teasing about his tunic. "What I wear, Keesta, is none of your business. But, for your information, it's a damn sight easier to get into some places where I've dug up stories for your people wearing this than a centerside tunic. People on the other side of the Ave don't like your sort, or haven't you noticed?"

"My, we're mouthier than usual. Still some of the Jocktobyt fire in you after all, eh?" The darkly tanned man poured some cracked sweetcrystals from a bar-dish onto his palm. "Go aim that corelli independence at your cousins downport. I don't like it, and I'm paying you."

Iain told himself it was no use wasting the price of a story just because he hadn't learned to ignore the asses he had to deal with day to day. "What's up?"

"I'm not surprised, from the number of troops I saw hanging casually around, not to mention the folk in the CIB uniforms."

"You noticed."

"I did. I also noticed that those aren't CIB personnel in those outfits; not an Aguent face among them. Private little war on the part of the good President, Keesta?"

The communications liaison wiped his hands clean of clinging crystals. "Now, aVairly, I should think a good newsound like yourself could manage to tell the difference between important facts and nonconsequential details. Especially when he's just been tipped to the hottest news story this fifth. I wouldn't be surprised at all if there weren't a healthy amount of extra credits to be gotten in a scoop like this -- lots of folks are going to want to know all the details. We'll settle for full coverage, immediate break-in, Centerweb and Midnet."

"What if --" Iain was about to ask what if he weren't interested in covering premeditated disasters, but Keesta interrupted.

"What if it gets thick? Don't worry, I'll have the crew watching out for you. Keep your head down and all those marvelous Jocktobyt instincts about yourself and you'll survive." He stood, reached over to flip back Iain's cape. "I'd get rid of the colors, though, boy. They upset the Man. He doesn't like survivors. We'll be watching for your report later. You're a lucky man, aVairly; your timing is impeccable." He flicked again at the cape. "Don't spoil your fun with silly costumes."

"What time for all the fun?" Iain asked sourly.

"Oh, half a measure, I'd say. Depends on our plants, but they're good, too. Half a measure sounds right. See you, aVairly."

Keesta smiled at Iain one last time and added, "Don't let us down." $\,$

de

By the time the singsong started, Leia had won friends -- if an evening's camaradie could be grounds enough for such a claim -- among a certain crowd of young spacers who had howled with delight when the Alderaani had taken a forward Dotarian firmly in hand, landing him flat on his back with a precise kick below the knee that had bent him over and open to the leverage that toppled him backward. Pleased with herself, and amazed that the back-ofthe-Embassy tricks her secretary had taught her actually worked, Leia benignly accepted her audience's applause and forgave them the sobriquet of 'mighty midget'. Upon recovery, the Dotarian complained to his crew and the singsong started, his ship against Leia's companions; a competition that was boisterous and loud and a bit less inclined toward violence than other calls to honor.

They seated Leia among themselves and called upon her to contribute an Alderaani song from time to time, an effort to offset the advantage the Dotarian's complement had in its Brokovian engineer. Leia found herself cut off from time and conscience, and loved every minute. It was late; the place was rowdy; she should be getting back; she didn't care. A glance at Dohlu, only for form's sake, told her the Bestinian girl felt the same.

A nudge in her side told her her turn to lead had come again.

de

There was only one possible location for the night's action: the Iron Wheel Tav. Iain aVairly straightened from his lazy lean against a kiosk across from the tavern and made his way to the lydemblazoned doors, adjusting his portacomp equipment about his waist to make it less noticeable. He hoped Keesta realized he couldn't take a fully-hung droid with him in there.

The Bestinian's comments still rankled; there was a delicate distinction in aVairly's newsound world between a reporter who knew the rules and cooperated with the government and inner contacts — were the reporter fortunate to have the latter — and one who ran puppy for his owners. Somebody somewhere seemed to think he had crossed that line. He stepped through the lit doors wondering if that somebody were right.

The place was beginning to stink with the night's alcohol, and the noise had increased accordingly. Conversations were loud; arguments rose and fell with increasing regularity; and in one third of the place, a singsong rattled the nerves.

"In '68, as the year grew late Gdnvue Region shuddered..."

The voice was high, spectacular but unmistakable above the crowd's clatter. Iain froze, the clutter of his night's thoughts instantly clarifying into one cold, unassailable conclusion.

"...To hear the roaring of ships of war As the peace of years was shattered."

He knew the verse that would roar out after the girl, a verse out of sequence, out of time, but a verse the Corellians loved however ignorant they might be of its implications. Jedi were only legends of wizards to these spacers; the woman they sang of was, to them, simply a hard-fighting, lusty Corellian. The girl was insane to bring it up; they, to sing it. But sing it they would, and how was she to know the Empire waited outside the door to annihilate them?

"Now, CasIMer was a dauntless dam, Five squads full sent to fell her..."

Iain stepped back. He wasn't going to do this. He didn't give a damn what 'the Man' thought. He wasn't going to hang around like some carrion feeder, awaiting murder and mayhem. That little girl...

"...And though by day in her blood she lay, Five squads full sent lay with her!"

The corelli in the tavern shouted and cheered and barely heard the few older sorts who joined the Alderaani girl in the Republican chorus. Iain spun around to face the exit; he felt cold and achingly hollow and wanted to get out of there, away from the too familiar songs and faces, away from the happy face he had seen on the young senator from Alderaan.

He went no further than his turn. Through the doorway stepped two spacers anyone who knew downport would recognize: men not above taking Imperial credits to wreck their fellows, men known to start fights for the mere pleasure of the sound of cracking heads. Keesta's plants, aVairly thought, scattering out of their way with the others. A scuffle started even as he thought, as if their presence infected the air with belligerence. Iain looked back to the singsong where the participants were just becoming aware of the invasion. The girl sat chatting, oblivious until a screech that hurt the ears rose and tables were overturned as a body crashed into the center of the room. Her head jerked around, her eyes wide with the fascination of innocent horror.

aVairly's mind was set at that look. He sped into motion as if action would distract him from the memories it helped surface, as if some small part of his consciousness reasoned he might, tonight, repay the survival of one ten-year-old boy when all the others had died.

He pushed his way through to the girls' table, grabbing at the Bestinian's arm, barely stopping. "Come on!" he shouted, "I know a way out back!" He half-pulled her from her chair, then let go and went after the princess.

She met him part way back to the table. He grabbed and spun her around, aiming her for the back of the tavern. "Out that way! It's safer!"

He had no time for her questions. "There are troopers coming!" He screamed at her through the din. "I'll get your friend! Head out back, but don't go through the alley without me! It's a trap!"

A second's hesitation to look again for the Bestinian earned her a hard push in the right direction. "I said, I'd get her!" Blaster fire nearby made both of them crouch and she was running even as she straightened.

Iain stepped back to grab the other girl, surprised that she wasn't already fleeing with Organa, or on his back for attempted kidnapping. But she was still at the table, fiddling with her wrist jewelry, straining to see into the fighting mass. "Of all the stupid -- what do you think this is, a hand-combat contest? Come on!"

He pulled at her, met resistance, and pulled again. "Your friend's already out back," he yelled. "Come on if you don't want to get your head blown off!"

"She's what?!" The girl stared stupidly at Iain, disbelieving. "What the hell do you think you're doing, playing the big Jocktobyt hero?" She perked up then, her gaze intent. "I do know you from somewhere! Come on, who are you, boy; whose sanction do you have?"

And then Iain knew, oh yes, he knew where he had seen, had heard her before. The slang, the wary if hungry eagerness; he was all too familiar with it all. He pulled one last time at her arm, roughly and with a hold that was impolitely unbreakable. "She's out back, sweets, and she wants her friend. Move!"

She moved, and he saw that he still held the advantage, that she had not seen his memory revealed in his eyes.



de

The back door was locked, a standard barrier system that the Senate pass strip on Leia's ID broke simply. Dohlu and the Jocktobyt man caught up with her and together they slipped into the empty alleyway.

"Where's the speeder?" the man snapped.

"Crossroads," Dohlu smiled with a satisfaction that puzzled Leia. Anyone planning an abduction with troopers on their way was stupid and this man had struck Leia as anything but that. He was simply trying to help. Before she could say so, though, he had bent down, picked up some debris and pitched it at an already cracked-open light source. Metal crackled on metal and the alley fell space black. Leia's mind changed quickly.

"Down the left branch," the man directed, "and to the left again."

"There isn't a left branch," Leia objected, stalling, unable to see anything.

"There damn well is one, and if you have to keep walking 'til you smack into a wall to find it, go! There will be troopers through this door in minutes, or are you that fond of Stormtroopers, Senator Organa?"

"They're better than kidnappers," Dohlu spoke at last, slowing Leia's heartbeat slightly. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Think again." The Jocktobyt's voice was harsh and closely followed by a gasp from Dohlu. "One more word out of you, and I'll remember what my father taught me about this sort of thing."

"What's going on?!" Leia demanded, desperately trying to place the man and woman in the darkness.

"I have a knife at your friend's back," came the answer. "Now do we move or not?"

"Go ahead, Lee," Dohlu said quickly. "It really doesn't matter. It'll be all right."

"No!" Anger Leia had kept under control for over a year now welled. "No. I can weather the embarrassment of being caught by troopers, sir, thank you! If you hurt Dohlu or me, though, I'll have you --"

"Oh for Deber's sweet sake --"

"Leia!" Dohlu urged. "He can't see you. Run! Get the troopers!" $\,$

"Oh, wouldn't you and Keesta just love that, missy?!" Leia heard the sound of someone falling against a wall; Dohlu gasped again. Then a brilliant, but tightly beamed light filled the end of the alley, backing her and Dohlu around a corner to avoid the brightness. When they had stopped halfway down the narrow enclosure, the light became more diffuse, softer. Leia could see Dohlu now, standing like a referee between herself and the

Jocktobyt who stood with one hand adjusting the light source on the equipment pack that hung from his belt, the other hand wrapped around a knife that glittered as he moved. "Run away from her, Senator, and those kind-hearted troopers will blast you down. It was a good plot, Mistress Eklestil, but it stinks."

"What are you talking abou --"

"How do you know --"

"I never forget a face, darling. I talked with friend Keesta tonight. Remember the briefing on the Cadbur affair? You were there as Keesta's little protegée. I have the report on the mission and the follow-up."

"I was not."

"Who is this Keesta? What --"

"Giy Keesta, Senator. You might remember him as Warlan Dahke's ghost writer. Saw him up the street half measure or so ago. Told me all about this action tonight. Wants me to cover it. I can see the keycode now: AldSen 66d in barbrawl; Pressen sends rgrts to Organa fmly. I can hear the commentators bewailing how much she'll be missed. I just bet. Now are we going, Senator, or do I get the story after all?"

Fear of abduction vanished from Leia's mind as the man's claims woke her memories. Yes, she had seen him before, one of the many newsounds who trailed after the officials of Court. An older, more deadly fear filled her with the mention of Warlan Dahke. The clean if bloody danger of the tavern was gone, replaced by the familiar intricacies of death at Centre. Anything was possible now. "Who are you?" she asked, trying for time. "I warn you, you are not gaining anything by accusing my friend --"

"She's not your friend. My name's aVairly, Iain aVairly." Dohlu laughed at that, a short, mean laugh that itched between Leia's shoulder blades. The man winced, shot Dohlu a look that was almost painful in its bottled frustration. "You remember me, Senator. I was the one who got you to declare your intentions to succeed your father."

"On Dahke's order? He knew all along?"

"No. My idea, but it paid well in the long run. Look, Senator Organa, I have no reason to be doing this but my own, probably crazy, concern for your safety. Now, can we leave -- Wait. Wait one --" He moved too quickly for Leia to do more than gasp as aVairly crossed to Dohlu and grabbed her, twisting her arm about until it was behind her and he could rummage through her jewelry.

"Leave her alone," Leia cried, rushing at him, but he had found what he wanted, had ripped a wrist-timer free of Dohlu's arm, then pushed the Bestinian back against the wall as Leia reached them.

The knife was back in his hand; Leia braked just centies from it, glancing helplessly at Dohlu who stood against the rough wall, panting and glaring at the Jocktobyt. He paid little attention

to either of them as he examined the wristlet.

"So you're a thief as well," Leia accused. He ignored her, reached for Dohlu again. Only the point of the knife held at her friend's throat kept Leia from jumping at him.

"Move," he said, more to Dohlu than Leia, and they left.

36

Four, five, six turns; left, left, right, left, right, right. Leia had no idea how deeply into the port their pace might have taken them, but she suspected they were only paralleling the Avenue; the odors of greenery, fresh air, the river, contraindicated downport. But if that were so...Leia could not see the logic of this route.

Twice she said something to Dohlu, but her friend was not very responsive. There was nothing to worry about was all the girl would say, leaving Leia to wonder at her confidence and wish she felt the same.

They turned at last into a dead end. Leia had not been thinking much the last bit of the way. Her senses had been tuned to the movements of the man, his terse directions; to Dohlu's odd demeanor. She realized she had been counting on the older girl to buck her up when the certainty of adrenalin ebbed; now she felt very much on her own and that sensation did not bear examination too closely.

They stopped. Gathering what nerve she had left, Leia turned to face aVairly. Dohlu stood at her side. "Now what?" she asked in her best sarcastic tone. "Murder? Rape? You certainly can't expect to hold us for ransom all by your lonesome. Or do you have some confederates waiting for us? Actually, I think the earlier story was more imaginative. 'Newsound saves Senator'. Quite a dramatic tape; you'd make lots of credits of that."

"Shut up, Senator." The words were sharp. His attention was on Dohlu and there was no kindness displayed for her in the tight line of his mouth or in the intense boring of his gaze. He held up her wristlet. "My apologies; I underestimated Keesta. I suppose I should be glad this was only a locator, not a recorder. I might keep my skin on yet."

He tossed the circlet at Leia who caught it on the tips of her fingers. She turned the timepiece over, puzzled, then saw the open back. Leia knew what she was looking at; any place she and her staff stayed was routinely wired, and just as routinely protected from the same. She had seen such configurations hundreds of times.

"She didn't turn it on 'til she had a chance to use both hands," Leia heard the man saying. "I doubt they've gotten a reading yet; anyway, they don't know where we are now."

Shaken, Leia held the wristlet up. "Dohlu, what is this?"

"For Father's sake, Leia, it's one of the safeties Mother has me wear at Court. I was only signalling for help." "Your pendant--"

"It's a new piece, Leia. By your gods, you don't believe this madman, do you?"

"The fight was planned," aVairly said rather impatiently. "The area was crawling with waiting troopers when I left you. If you really think that spacers like Indies hang out where there are normally squads wandering about to react at the first sound of blaster fire, then you're more naive than you appear, Senator."

"This is all circumstantial. You can't expect me to believe that my best friend would--"

"I believe anything of a best friend!" he snapped. His grim expression was shot through with pain. "I'm Jocktobyt, remember? And I would have thought Bail Organa's daughter would know better, or have we all forgotten who betrayed your Jedi Enclave?"

"There's no reason for me to believe you!" Leia returned, her doubts soaring, her self-recrimination for questioning Dohlu equally high. "You admit you work for Dahke!"

"They feed me leads and I get the stories, that's all! There's nothing wrong in surviving. But I don't help kill little girls. Do you think I'm making this up for my amusement, that I'd lay my career -- hell, my $\underline{\text{life}}$ with $\underline{\text{this}}$ bunch -- on the line for you?"

"Listen to the brave Jocktobyt," Dohlu murmured. "Manhandling girls in the great tradition."

"Dohlu!" Leia flinched from the mockery in Dohlu's voice and from the hate that blazed from the man at the Bestinian's words. She stepped to the young woman's side. "Don't anger him," she breathed, taking Dohlu's hand to comfort them both. "This is no time for you to lose your temper, too. Let me handle it, Doli--" Leia stopped. Dohlu jerked at her hand, but Leia held fast. She could feel her friend's nervousness, the anxiety that rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the deadening of Leia's own emotions.

In the other bracelet Dohlu wore, one jewel did not glisten in the alleylight. Leia recognized the shape and cut of the small hexagon; the odd color, unnoticeable but by one who would be looking -- or had already been made suspicious.

A proxter. A very simple one, backup probably, but nothing Syr Eklestil would ever buy for her daughter. Used in spying by Empire and Alliance. Both locator and sender.

A second time Dohlu tried to pull away, but the Jocktobyt had come up to them and held her as Leia unfastened the circlet. She was going to crush it, fling it to the ground and smash it, but aVairly snatched the device away. He stared at it, then at her. Without further comment, he handed Leia the knife; waited until she had taken it, stepping back from Dohlu as she did so; then he ran down the alley they had come by, turning out of sight down a way that would lead him to the nearby river.

In the best of administrations, friendship is a guide to the placement of trust, a pleasing accompaniment to competence. Words she had written in her private journal, taken from her mother's lessons, her father's advice, came to haunt Leia: In the worst of administrations, friendship is a chimera, coming in the guise of deception, and trust is earned only by the willingness to sacrifice that which is most precious, even if that be life. This is the price so terrible to pay: that one generation must deny its heart so those who follow may be free to trust in one another again.

Leia had thought to keep those words as a reminder to guard against the coldness she had felt in so many of her father's companions; now she saw that she was meant to believe them.

"Well?" Dohlu's voice, the barely disguised disdain, broke into Leia's emptiness. "What now, Lee? March me to your father? Bewail Imperial treachery to the Senate?" Strain broadened the Bestinian's vowels, highlighting her native intonations. "Go on, I'm sure they'll be glad to know you were so clever in ignoring all my advice and side-stepping every trap set."

"Were they going to kill me tonight?"

"What do you think? There are some people very put off by this marvelous game you and Bail play; you're getting to be as big a nuisance as he was. Neither one of you listen to--"

"Dohlu, why?!"

"Oh, for -- " The older girl took a breath. She collected her reactions and reduced them to cool mockery once again. "You never did take what I said about the rebellion seriously, did you? You always assumed it was steamletting, like you complaining about your work, or just playing adversary. But I meant it, Leia. You want reality? The Empire is reality, Lee. I don't intend to be a martyr like my father, or waste my life like Mother on some silly Alliance that hasn't got a chance at World's End of winning. You know what power is? It's setting up a little charade like this simply by telling someone you're bored with Organa and knowing the matter will be taken care of. Just like that. It's not taking pot shots at the Fleet with wornout hulks; it's not your oldtime senators with their wornout words that don't change anything. You're going to have to kill me, Leia," Dohlu paused as if surprised by her conclusion herself, "and I don't think you can. Or that left-over Jock-tobyt you've got for a savior. It's not part of your pretty picture of the Republic. My father couldn't; not even to defend himself. I didn't think I could when they asked me. But real power can, Leia; someone like Warlan Dahke can. I don't want to sit around and play 'Old Republic' with all of you until we get blown away. I'm sick of grand words and lofty notions, and have been for longer than you could guess. I kept hoping you'd wake up; I really did. But you're as crazy as your father."

Footsteps hushed them. aVairly trotted into sight. He stopped a few steps away from Leia, catching his breath between words. "I cracked the back and dumped it in the river. That should short it and distort the signal long enough to --"

"To what?" Leia's voice cracked, betraying her expectation of his next words.

"To kill her."

"Why? Why can't we take her back to the consulate? Let my people deal with her?"

"One: that would only delay the inevitable. Of course, it would be easier for you to ignore it then -- and believe me, I don't envy you this -- but, two: honey, the squads are only a short way down the river. I saw their lights. There's no possibility she'll let us get back to safety. It's her or us."

"We'll knock her unconscious!"

"I can't carry her fast enough! Or do you want to leave her behind so she can blab even more to the government? Senator, you're not thinking with your head. And four: \underline{I} intend to do it for \underline{me} , if for nothing else. Your friend has just cut \underline{my} throat, even if we do get out of this alive."

"But you can come work for us."

"Which takes us back to reason three: always trim your enemies when at all possible. Remember what I said about Cadbur."

Leia looked away, her murmured 'no' heavy with denial. "You reported the scouring of the Acell there."

"I did."

"What time did they...did they really do it? Not the official time."

"Then they knew when the coordinator's meeting was to be held?" $\label{eq:coordinator}$

"Of course they did."

"And Syr Eklestil was going to be late. Her delay wasn't accidental, was it, Dohlu?"

No answer. The Bestinian simply returned Leia's gaze.

In the silence, all three heard distant sounds of activity coming down the river.

Dohlu broke for the alley entrance.

Leia shouted almost as loudly as Dohlu tried to scream, but aVairly was quicker than both, catching the Bestinian at the waist, clasping a hand to her mouth, and hissing at Leia.

"Give me the knife, Senator. We don't have any more time for talk."

Leia started to turn the hilt toward aVairly, but stopped. "This isn't your battle," she heard herself say, feeling an impenetrable depth fall about her, closing her off from everything she knew.

The folk on Cadbur had died because of Dohlu's information. Leia could only guess at what other mischief Dohlu had caused. Her father had wanted to shield her from the terrifying side of rebellion, but this was her fight now; there were lives she, too, was now responsible for.

Dohlu had used her. Dohlu was her friend.

"Tell me what to do."

"What? Look, Senator, please, give me the knife. I had more training before I was ten than --"

"Tell me what to do! I'm the one she betrayed."

He told her. She did as he said, surely if messily, devoid of feeling. He laid the body down, rather than drop it. "Thank you," Leia said faintly, resisting his effort to take the knife from her. "I might have to use it again," she murmured. He paused. Leia started to walk away, unsure, beginning to shiver.

Dohlu is dead. We have to get out of here. Dohlu was going to let them kill me, so she...We have --

"We have to get out of here," she heard the man say as he draped a cape over her hunched shoulders. He took the knife, hiding it. Then with her hand in his, they ran from the alley to find the river and what safety the night would allow.



In the Alderaani Consulate, in a spacious meeting room with bay windows that overlooked the river and the port beyond, Bail Organa wondered at himself. His calmness was truly remarkable, he thought, incredible even, considering how near the Imperial Commandant stood, this unctuous Omnan who so blithely recounted the details of Leia Organa's death. Lilan has at long last reached me, he observed with bitter control, yet not as easily as I could reach out and break this hypocritical bastard's —

"I do regret this mission, Viceroy," the dapper commander said, one hand spread lightly on the light wooden top of Organa's desk. "I have a daughter myself, you know. Ah, but they reach an age when they're no longer controllable. Pity the young Princess didn't use the same judgment tonight for which she is so well known in the Senate."

"Get out of here." Lilan would have to excuse him his rudeness; after all, he was not hitting the man yet, which he dearly wanted to do.

The Imperial sighed. "Well, all a person can do is try to be courteous. We will, of course, for official reasons, have the body detained until morning."

"You'll do no such thing!" Organa slammed his hand down on the desk, next to the Imperial's. "My people will claim my daughter tonight; she will be among her own!"

"If we are to charge anyone with her death, sir, the body must be --" $\,$

"What body, Commandant? Has something happened to someone in my retinue?" $\,$

The narrow double doors to the inner study clicked shut as Bail spun around.

"Leia!"

The Imperial breathed in sharply, his face flushing a deep violet.

Bail Organa shoved his seat back and took a few anxious steps toward his daughter. He stopped short, held back by the pale face he saw, the wide black eyes, the tautness of her muscles. "This man came to tell us you were dead," he managed to say.

"I know." The words were clipped, revealing; she tried to smile and amended them with, "I heard you talking, from the study."

Regaining his composure, the Imperial seemed willing to continue the charade. He bowed slightly. "My apologies, Senator, and to your sire. Obviously, a case of mistaken identification. Too quickly assumed, perhaps."

"Perhaps." Bail had never heard Leia's voice so cold.

"I will leave you to your night's rest. Senator. Viceroy."

The door slid shut and all the control Bail had so desperately engaged broke. "Oh dear sweet Dam of us all, Leia! What happened!?" he exclaimed, holding his arms open for the girl to find comfort in, for she truly looked on the verge of collapse.

She took his hands instead. Her hands, hidden before by the strange cloak she wore, were dirty and stained and trembled in his. She brought their hands together and laid her forehead on them in suplication. "Fadr, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I --"

"No, none of that." Bail broke the grip of petition and pulled his daughter close, sheltering her, knowing already from her face and her voice what her frantic clutching and tears told him now, that there was one more portion of the universe's dark side he could protect her from no longer. He held off his questions and let her cry. Depending on what had occurred, there might not be time for sorrow later.

Finally she straightened, quieted her sobs, although she still clung to the front of Organa's robe and rested her cheek against his chest. "I was so stupid," she managed to say at last. "I didn't -- Dohlu, she --"

"Gods, Dohlu," Bail remembered. "Syr is frantic. I take it she went straight to their quarters?"

Leia pulled back and stared up at him, the wildness he had seen earlier in her eyes showing again. Silently, she held out her hands again, but when Bail tried to take them, she held them higher. The blue and crimson material fell away from her arms, which were also dirty, dark with a stain Bail knew well.

So it is as bad as that? He nodded in understanding, his mind shaking loose its temporary fright in preparation for quick thought. There would be some replanning to do tonight.



Her father had never been one for doubletakes. The gentle sorrow in his eyes vanished at sight of the blood, replaced with an intense alertness Leia found more comforting than words.

He led her back into the study, the doors clicking behind him to indicate the integrity of their seal. This small den was safe against devices such as proxters or snoopbeams, and always had been.

Before he could say anything, Leia turned away, clutching the cape about herself for security. "I killed her, Fadr," she said to the wall, her words spilling out. "I killed Dohlu. She was a spy. She took me down to the tavern so her people could kill me and blame it on downporters. She had never been my friend. Never. And I killed her. I killed her because she would have killed me and had him killed, and she was the one who turned the Cadbur settlement in, and she knew about all the other plots against me this year and there wasn't anything else to do!" She spun around. "Why?!" Leia cried at her father. "Why wasn't there anything else to do?!!"

Nearly gagging on her sobs, she fought back the tears, waiting for him to answer. But he made no reply. Her father studied her silently, then stepped up and took the cape from her shoulders. She followed him closely with her eyes lest she miss some clue, some notion exonerating the night, but there were none.

"You will have to tell me everything that happened, Leia," he said at last, folding the cloak over one arm. "From the beginning of your idea to go downport through to the end. Tell me now, and it will be easier for us to make the report later." He paused and turned the cloak over to examine the colors of its lining. "Leia, where did you get this?"

There isn't going to be an answer. Not now. Maybe not ever. Leia knew, of course she knew, such betrayals happened. She had heard enough about the sudden death rebels faced; she knew the ignoble ends that darkened the halls of the Court. She knew about the violence, and the chance it would engulf her. Only now that knowledge was empirical.

"Leia?"

"It was his, the newsound's, aVairly." Leia took the cloak, took her father's hand and sat with him on a nearby lounger. She held the cape securely on her lap, like a memory aide for some speech or recitation. "I was tired," she began, looking past her father to a time that suddenly seemed years ago. "I was bored..."



Her throat was parched, consequence of her exertions, the recitation and the night's drinking. Without comment on the story yet, her father rose

and went to fetch some fruit-tarted water.

"What's this, Leia?"

He turned and held up a long slender blade, its handle lined with smokey blue stone, and with a ruby counterpoint where the end of the grip flared into two curves. A thin sheet of film, barely attached to it, fluttered past the beverage tray to the floor.

You said you might need it again, written in formal Galactic, and signed, I remain in return, Daymond. Leia reread the note, wishing he had stayed, knowing he had said he would not, while her father re-examined the blade.

"The kinfolds gave the Republic good fighters," he said thoughtfully. "Alderaan never hired them; but for mercenaries, they were honorable. This is a Holder's dirk. And that is the Daymond huearray, with the chief-fold striping: see the gilt thread? Someone escaped the massacres."

"To become a newsound for Warlan Dahke," Leia said, her fingers tracing the pattern of the cape dye. "For a little while." She wished the tall, quick man good speed away from the consulate, confident that he had remembered the back way out. Iain aVairly had told her he was a survivor; she believed him. And for a little while, he had not been a coward.

A glint caught her corner of her sight. She turned. Her father was holding the blade hilt out for her to take. Leia shied back. "I -- I don't want it."

"You will need it again, Leia."

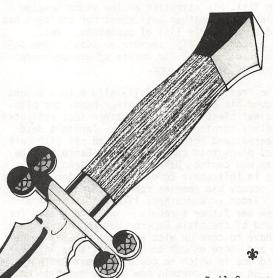
She shook her head in denial, knowing it was futile, cherishing a last second or two before she must acknowledge its reality.

"Leia." He took her hand and folded her tired fingers about the jeweled handle. "Take it, child," Bail Organa said. "The choices have narrowed for you. You must either embrace the sword of the Alliance now, or retire completely. Our enemies will allow no for alternative. We need you with us, Lee, you your children. and all the children. There was If you stay with never a chance us. we could have done it all Leia still stared in time for at the knife. you, but maybe in "Take it," he repeated, time more gently. "Or go home. Your life is as forfeit as mine, now. And you may run into this man again. He's given you his Duty; you may need what he can do to redeem it one day." He paused. "Leia, I -- if I

have been wrong to involve you, forgive me. I did not think your time would come like this."

Leia's gaze traveled from the blade to her father. Wrong? No, not in his hopes. Perhaps foolish to cling to this one shimmer of innocence, but foolish was a word Leia was almost becoming fond of. If it were foolish to believe in the fight against the Empire, then Leia would be so. But she would never again think words were the sole battlefield for her. Her time to join the harsher war had come, as she should have known it would. If she wished its initiation had been less personal... well, that was a conceit.

She took the blade.



Bail Organa sat in a chair by the window, unable to return to the warmth of his bed. There was no moon; the darkly rippled clouds of autumn rolled over the countryside below the city before a relentless wind. He heard his wife come into the room, heard the robe slip from her shoulders and onto a stool, heard her turn back the sheets of their bed.

They hadn't spoken much since he had come home from Urt. He did not think they would speak much before he left for Om again, for a last few weeks with Leia before his planned excursion to Dantooine, and the rebels' secret base.

"She's known nothing but the Empire," Lilan said unexpectedly. "And the shock was great, for all our guidance. She'll relax again, when the times allow it."

The images he had been trying to remember, the days with his daughter as she had been years ago, before her involvement with their dream, vanished. He almost wished he could have seen her face while she and Dohlu were safely away for one unguarded evening; it had been such a long time since he had seen

Leia silly and giggling. And now it was worse, now that she was no longer just his daughter and protégée, but also his comrade in arms.

"Bail?"

The wind disturbed the vinings outside the window, scraping them against the outer pane. This time, it was Bail Organa who laid down his head and wept for the way they must be.

POSTSCRIPT

Warlan Dahke sat sideways at his Senate desk, chin on fist, his attention on the young Senator from Alderaan. Neither enticement nor accident had removed her from his list of opponents. Well, that's a shame, really, there's so little time left for niceties and creative twists of circumstances. Senator, you force my hand.

The President thoughtfully slid a tape around and around his desk with his other hand, the plastic against plastic making a pattern that reflected the endless turnings of his mind. Tarkin's deadline neared, and both the Aquent and his Sith Dark Lord had plans that conflicted with Dahke's. The New Year was coming; Dahke did not intend to be sitting in this chair come the new session. But he had to occupy his enemies for the change of the guard. Vader -- and others like that brat of a girl and her father's rebels -- would not care for the sound of the title Emperor Warlan Dahke. He would have to come up with a diversion, one large enough and loose enough to allow Alliance intervention and one in which he could interest Darth Vader. He wasn't certain how he was going to do this, but he was certain an idea would surface.

He was an inventive being.



"I can't believe Dahke would order something like this, not such broad reprisals, not at New Year's. Are you certain?"

The rebel general continued to program his comp as he answered the young woman at his side. "The President's office also has its leaks, Princess. We're certain; we've had Throne confirmation."

"Well, at least the Emperor's office leaks

like a net. It's really Lucef?"

"Yes, that's the worrisome part, isn't it?
Xet isn't going to be happy about this happening so close to home without its knowledge."

"Unless Vader knows, too. This could be a trap."

"We can't afford not to take advantage of this situation. We can't stop this clearance, but we can till the ground and harass. Are <u>you</u> certain it's safe to get involved?"

Leia Organa laughed once and checked a monitor. "I couldn't refuse, General. Dahke practically made the assignment a first class recognition. I wonder why he wants Alderaan away from the Senate. If he thinks this is one more way to eliminate me, he's mistaken." She smiled at Jan Dodonna. "'Diplomatic mission to assure the Lucefen of the Throne's continued support in their disagreements with Xet.' he called it. We'll change it into a mission of mercy, and reclaim a few of the deaths he's ordered. He knows which side I stand on, Jan. Sorry, I have to go now."

Dodonna watched her leave and approved of the girl's demeanor. The exiled fighters of the Alliance liked her; the council of rebel commanders found her ideas and Imperial contacts as useful as -- sometimes even more so than -- Bail's. She was more than her father's daughter they had discovered; there was the steel of Lilan Eymone in her.

And she had been old enough -- older than many -- to learn how to fight.



Iain aVairly had his remaining belongings cleared from his citysuite before false dawn. He tried not to think about his flat on Om and all he had there; he would not be going back. His call to the home office was fortunately timed for breaktime there: no nosy fellow-worker plied him with questions; his transfer request sped through the comps quietly, quickly. The faxed chit came up for Gdnvue. Remote. Safe.

New Year Holiday came, the turning of the galactic cycle. Iain aVairly of the kinfold Daymond spent the week in the backwater quiet of the northwest systems, far away from Om, far away from the story of how Warlan Dahke's cadre stormed the Throne and won an Empire, far away from everything.

He survived.

